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# Children of the Bible: American Protestantism, "A Formula of Agreement," and the Twentieth-Century Ecumenical Movement

Brittany Acors

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Children of the Bible:  
American Protestantism, "A Formula of Agreement," and the Twentieth-Century Ecumenical  
Movement

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Science in Biology and Religious Studies from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Brittany Acors

The College of William and Mary

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## Introduction

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.” 1 Cor. 1:10

In 1997, four Lutheran and Reformed denominations signed a document entitled “A Formula of Agreement” that brought them into full communion partnership. The event ended five hundred years of dispute between the two major branches of Protestantism.<sup>1</sup> In prior centuries, Lutheran and Reformed Churches were unable to resolve their different theologies on topics such as Holy Communion, salvific mercy, and scriptural interpretation. In the discussions preceding “A Formula of Agreement,” however, Protestant theologians and leaders de-emphasized those differences and placed more importance on the common mission of the Churches, spreading the Word of God through preaching and action. Thus, the document launched an unprecedented ecumenical movement, and subsequent calls for and actions towards ecumenism have grown among Protestant communities.

This thesis offers a historical analysis of the Protestant ecumenical movement. Five hundred years after the beginning of the Reformation and twenty years after the “Formula of Agreement,” the modern ecumenical developments go beyond issues of Christianity. They intersect with culture, politics, and the global reach of secularism. As the current work demonstrates, the reconciliation and full communion partnership between Lutheran and Reformed Churches in America exemplified by “A Formula of Agreement” came both as responses to outside pressures and an internal attempt to refocus theological and communal

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<sup>1</sup> The four Churches that signed “A Formula of Agreement” are the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. Their histories and theological positions are outlined in Chapter One.

priorities. To illustrate these complex developments and changes, the following chapters situate theology within its broad context and chart the intricate dialectic between belief and normative practices.

Chapter One analyzes the transition that occurred from the original forms of Martin Luther's and John Calvin's religious traditions to the American iterations of these movements. It gives a summary of the historical unions that produced the four Churches that signed "A Formula of Agreement," and considers the use of Scripture in the formative documents of these Churches. Chapter Two evaluates the four decades of dialogues that preceded official ecumenical partnership. Throughout these dialogues, the participating Churches gradually emphasized their common mission as Christians while de-emphasizing their historical animosities and theological differences. Chapter Three examines the text of "A Formula of Agreement" and the unfavorable response from the more conservative Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Finally, Chapter Four applies the theories of Charles Taylor and Victor Turner to the development of Protestant ecumenism in twentieth-century America.

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* explains the rise of a secularized society in the sense that believing in a higher power has become one option of many. It provides support for the hypothesis that ecumenism serves to unite those who choose to believe in opposition to those who do not. In this secular age, the differences between believing groups must be de-emphasized in the face of the much greater differences between believers and non-believers. Furthermore, Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* contributes to the analysis of why Holy Communion has become a point of unity, rather than division, in the modern era, since it facilitates a feeling of *communitas* in a society in which religion broadly represents a realm of anti-structure.

Synthesizing the history of the four Lutheran and Reformed Churches in America that signed the agreement, the progress of their discussion, and the framework provided by Taylor's and Turner's theories provides a unique understanding of the way the twentieth century has allowed for unity that had previously been impossible. This understanding provides a broader explanation of the ecumenical movement and why it has become predominant in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In 1517, Martin Luther (1483-1546) posted his *95 Theses*, sparking what has since come to be known as the Protestant Reformation. Luther based his reformation heavily on Scripture and the ways in which the Roman Catholic Church and their interpretation of Scripture was contrary to his understanding of it. He emphasized the need for people to interpret the Bible for themselves, which is why he translated the New Testament from Latin into German, and his writings were full of biblical references. Luther's contemporary, John Calvin (1509-1564), similarly utilized Scripture for his vision of the ideal church. Calvin's seminal work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which he wrote between 1541 and 1560, also reference Scripture to support his theological claims. Although the two Reformation leaders reached similar conclusions on the sacraments, keeping only the celebration of the Eucharist and baptism, they differed on the interpretation of Christ's presence in the bread and wine, as well as on the idea of predestination, Calvin's key idea that God has already decided the fate of all people as either eternal life or eternal damnation.

As the Protestant Reformation spread throughout Europe, differing theological interpretations, aided by the rise of nationalism, led to an increasing diversity of religious traditions in various regions of Europe. Colonialism and immigration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries aided the spread of Protestantism around the globe, including to the

Americas. What began as a disgruntled monk who hoped to reform the Roman Catholic Church has since resulted in more than 2,000 different Protestant Churches worldwide, including more than 200 denominations in America alone.<sup>2</sup> Among these groups are the Lutheran and Reformed Churches in America, which claim their roots in the teachings of Martin Luther and John Calvin, respectively. As new Churches formed and spread their messages, the emphasis on Scripture and the interpretation of God's Word changed over time and across communities. The four Churches that signed "A Formula of Agreement," the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC), each have their own unique history of development in the United States and unions with various Churches within their traditions. In their formative texts and constitutional documents, each denomination's use of Scripture is indicative of the changes that have occurred in Protestant Churches over the past several centuries.

As a result of the changing emphases on Scripture and tradition, these four mainline Protestant denominations participated in a series of conversations with the goal of reaching a full communion partnership. This dialogue series was not the first attempt at agreement between Lutheran and Reformed theologians. At times throughout history, different groups have made attempts at reconciliation, including at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529. At this time, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) attempted to reach an agreement on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist at the request of their prince, Philip of Hesse (1504-1567), who felt the need for a unified theology in the land he ruled.<sup>3</sup> Despite Philip's best intentions, the issue of the Lord's Supper was so divisive that Luther and Zwingli failed to reach an agreement. There were

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the diversity of religious movements in America, see Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Carlos Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) 242.



several other attempts to reconcile theological differences regarding the Eucharist and other issues between Luther, Zwingli, and John Calvin throughout the sixteenth century, including the Montbeliard Colloquy (1586) and the Colloquy of Cassel (1661), but none were successful, and the Lutheran and Reformed Churches grew into their own separate entities.<sup>4</sup>

The mid-twentieth-century dialogue between Lutheran and Reformed Churches in America hoped to resolve their historical differences and ultimately enter into full communion, in which they could both share the Lord's Supper in one another's churches and exchange ministers. However, in order to reach a full communion agreement, the participating Churches had to recognize one another's theology and church practices, as well as resolve differences in ecclesiastical hierarchy, or church structure. The dialogue that occurred in the decades prior to the signing of "A Formula of Agreement" was published in three parts: *Marburg Revisited* (1962-1966), *An Invitation to Action* (1981-1983), and *A Common Calling* (1992). The primary topics covered include the centrality of Scripture, the interpretation of the Eucharist, Christology, justification, and society's influence on religion. Each series of dialogue not only decreased in number of pages, but also in the number of remaining issues to be discussed.

After four decades of discussion, the Churches ultimately concluded that there were no major theological obstacles inhibiting full communion partnership any longer. By entering into full communion, the Churches affirmed one another as a right teacher of the Word of God and recognized their preaching and baptizing authority. More importantly, they agreed to share the

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<sup>4</sup> Each of these is mentioned a section, entitled "Major Lutheran-Reformed Conversations," of the first series of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue in America. At the Montbeliard Colloquy, "[t]hey discussed the Lord's Supper, christology, and predestination. The question whether Huguenot refugees might receive the Lord's Supper in Lutheran churches was answered in the negative by the Reformed on the ground that participation in the Sacrament is a mark of profession." At the Colloquy of Cassel, Reformed and Lutheran participants reached tentative agreement on theological issues including the Lord's Supper and predestination; however, these "agreements were later repudiated." *Marburg Revisited*, ed. Paul C. Empie and James I. McCord (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966) 68.

Lord's Supper. This was a significant departure from the previous few centuries, in which interpretational differences of the presence of Christ in the sacrament prevented Lutheran and Reformed Christians from sharing the Lord's Supper. Both "A Formula of Agreement" and its 2000 follow-up, "A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament," are legalistic texts, laying out the guidelines, rules, and other stipulations for the ecumenical partnership. For all theological context, they refer to the published dialogues of the preceding decades. In 1999, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS), a more conservative branch of Lutheranism, published a response explaining that their refusal to sign "A Formula of Agreement," despite participating in part of the dialogue, stems from their belief in the original interpretation of Scripture and historical Lutheran confessions. In signing "A Formula of Agreement" and entering into agreement with the Reformed Church, the LCMS believes that the ELCA has betrayed its Lutheran confession and is no longer an orthodox Lutheran Church. Despite this accusation, the participating Lutheran and Reformed Churches have maintained their ecumenical partnership.

In signing "A Formula of Agreement," Lutheran and Reformed Churches de-emphasized their differences to present a united community that they believe Jesus called for in the New Testament, as indicated by the epigraph from 1 Corinthians. The Churches view this mission of unity as especially necessary in the face of secularization and injustice in the modern world. The analysis that follows of American Protestantism and "A Formula of Agreement" brings together themes of history, sociology, and religious studies that have not previously been considered as a whole, and uses them to better understand the unique phenomenon of twentieth-century ecumenism. The following thesis argues that the societal changes that resulted in a more secular worldview in the twentieth century enabled denominations that had been divided since the

Protestant Reformation to unify in the name of common mission, setting the stage for more conversations and unions in the following decades.

## Chapter One

### From Europe to America: Lutheran and Reformed Theologies Cross the Atlantic

“Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.” 1 Peter 3:8

The Lutheran and Reformed traditions began under the guidance of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564). Prior to the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church dominated the European cultural landscape. However, in the sixteenth century, Europe underwent a “renewed interest in classical culture, known as the Renaissance; the emergence of centralized states; the growth of the Western European economy; the rise of a literate bourgeoisie; and an increased awareness among many clerics and lay people of the enormous gap between the world they lived in and the ideals of their religion.”<sup>5</sup> These changes sparked dissent among the religious populace as leading intellectuals began identifying discrepancies between the teachings of the Catholic Church and the text of the Bible, and then began speaking out against them. While the Catholic Church had previously harshly rebuked dissidents, such as Jan Hus (1369-1415), the Cathars (c. 1300), and John Wycliffe (1330-1384), the new political situation that arose in fifteenth and sixteenth centuries permitted movements to grow without attracting the Church’s attention, spread through nationalism and a Scripture-based message, and spark the global spread of Protestantism that continues to exist in America today.

When Martin Luther wrote his *95 Theses* in October 1517, the religious and political situation in his town of Wittenberg, Germany was ripe for reform. Luther learned from his parishioners that a man named Johann Tetzel was selling plenary indulgences, the full remission

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<sup>5</sup> Eire (2016) xiii.

of sins, to anyone who donated to the building of St. Peter's Basilica.<sup>6</sup> Luther's fiery response, the *95 Theses*, responded by questioning the authority of Tetzel, or even the Pope, to grant this pardon.<sup>7</sup> Demonstrating his background as a monk and a scholar, Luther included in his theses references to the Bible, including the Gospel of Matthew (Theses 1 and 11), Paul's letter to the Corinthians (Thesis 78), Jeremiah (Thesis 92), and Acts (Thesis 95), which contradicted this claim of supreme papal authority and infallibility.<sup>8</sup> Originally written in Latin and printed for academic debate, Luther's theses were not intended as a call to arms, nor as benign suggestions for reform; rather, he believed identifying the error of the Church's ways and their deviation from Scripture could make a positive change. Thus, he sent his theses to important figures, like Archbishop Albert of Mainz, who could enact change in the way the Church interacted with common people.<sup>9</sup> The Archbishop in turn forwarded the theses to Pope Leo X, who initially "dismissed Luther as a German drunkard, and brushed off the whole controversy as a monkish squabble."<sup>10</sup> Despite this dismissal, Luther continued to grow in fame and incite argument among academics, clergy, and the laity throughout Germany, until a year later, when the Pope could no longer ignore the growing dissent.

Luther's interpretation of the Bible was central to his criticism of the Roman Catholic Church, and the primary reason the Church accused him of heresy. His guiding principle of *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone as the authority on Christianity, colored his encounter with Cardinal Cajetan, the Catholic authority sent to force Luther to recant at Augsburg in October 1518.<sup>11</sup> At this meeting, Luther rejected both the authority of the Pope as well as the Pope's role as chief

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<sup>6</sup> Eire (2016) 131.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis Janz, *A Reformation Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 88.

<sup>8</sup> Janz (2008) 88-93.

<sup>9</sup> Eire (2016) 150.

<sup>10</sup> Eire (2016) 150.

<sup>11</sup> Eire (2016) 153.

interpreter of Scripture, “arguing that the pope blatantly abused biblical doctrine and denying that the pope’s authority trumped that of the Bible.”<sup>12</sup> Despite valuing the Bible and striving to establish it as a driving factor in Christian life, “Luther’s concern was not... biblical literalism but the effect of Jesus’ words.”<sup>13</sup> Between 1518 and 1521, Luther continued to write documents based in Scripture that established how a Christian life should be lived and condemned contradictory Church practices, including *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), and *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520). Each of these texts expanded Luther’s theology in contrast to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, by outlining plans for an “evangelical” Church in line with Jesus’ teachings, reducing the sacraments to include only baptism and communion, and emphasizing the ideas of *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, justification through God’s grace by faith alone.<sup>14</sup> Luther’s main idea was that “[a] simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it.”<sup>15</sup> Following his excommunication at the Diet of Worms in 1521, subsequent sequestration at the Wartburg Castle until March 1522, and translation of the New Testament into German, Luther had established a clear idea of what the ideal Church should promise. The most significant changes Luther hoped to enact birthed the Protestant Church form, including:

the promotion of biblically based preaching; the abolition of confession and fasting, and of clerical celibacy and monasticism; the abolition of masses for the dead; the reduction of clerical privileges, coupled with increased lay control over the clergy; the dismantling of existing episcopal bureaucracies; the redistribution of the church’s wealth; and the creation of new social welfare programs. Nationalistic grievances against Rome and Italian clerics also figured prominently.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Eire (2016) 154.

<sup>13</sup> Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 161.

<sup>14</sup> Eire (2016) 173.

<sup>15</sup> Eire (2016) 156.

<sup>16</sup> Eire (2016) 179.

Although Luther generally opposed the way organized religion made people complacent, he conceded that what came to be known as the Lutheran Church was a better representation of Scripture than the Roman Catholic Church, and it more effectively delivered the message of grace through its sermons and interpretation of the sacraments. Ultimately, Luther “did not repudiate the new networks of Lutheran churches as long as they were agents of faith and love and not self-serving institutions.”<sup>17</sup> Luther’s biblically-based reforms paved the path for the development of subsequent Protestant denominations, including the modern iterations of Lutheranism today.

Luther’s contemporary, John Calvin, similarly utilized Scripture for his vision of the ideal Church. Born in Noyon, France, in 1509, Calvin was a young child when Luther wrote his 95 *Theses*, so as he grew up he was aware of the burgeoning Protestant Reformation to the east.<sup>18</sup> However, France remained a Catholic country, with Protestants experiencing severe persecution. Calvin was influenced by Luther’s reformation, but he raised questions about the sacraments, free will, and justification that he felt Luther answered inadequately.<sup>19</sup> He also believed in a need for a greater focus on rituals and living a Christian life. Emphasizing the value of Scripture for the layperson, Calvin’s first major written work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, gave “a summary of the Reformed Protestant faith” with the goal being “to prepare readers for their encounter with the divine Word.”<sup>20</sup> Like Luther’s 95 *Theses*, Calvin’s *Institutes* heavily referenced the Bible, including similar passages from the Gospels, Paul’s letters, and Acts, as well as others like Genesis, Ezekiel, Job, and Isaiah. However, unlike Luther, Calvin’s hermeneutic represented a more literal biblical reading. Throughout his *Institutes*, Calvin

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<sup>17</sup> Hendrix (2015) 289.

<sup>18</sup> Eire (2016) 288.

<sup>19</sup> Eire (2016) 286.

<sup>20</sup> Eire (2016) 291.

proposed that Scripture is how God reveals God's self to humanity, and that studying Scripture is the only way to know God's Will. He believed Scripture should stand alone without human interpretation or claims to it, and the church cannot choose what to follow and what to disregard, nor claim any sort of authority over the Word of God.<sup>21</sup> As for humanity itself, Calvin viewed it as a "miserable ruin" comprised of "depravity and corruption."<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther and John Calvin's division over how Scripture should be interpreted and applied paved the way for disunity between their followers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

While Luther and Calvin reached similar conclusions on the sacraments, keeping only baptism and Eucharist, they divided on most other subjects, including free will, justification, and good works. Confused by Luther's position that God gracefully granted salvation based on faith alone, Calvin hoped to bring the message of justification to a more finite conclusion. To this end, Calvin presented the idea of predestination, in which "salvation is freely offered to some while others are barred from access to it."<sup>23</sup> Interpretation of this idea has altered in modern Protestant denominations that claim to be born from Calvin's theology, but the idea of a division between the elect and the damned remains. Furthermore, while Luther believed that works were done to reflect Jesus' intentions, rather than to earn salvation, to Calvin, "the elect could have no clearer sign of their election than the fact that they were busy trying to build Christ's kingdom on earth."<sup>24</sup> Calvin therefore advocated for governance based on Christian principles, as well as a strictly-enforced Christian lifestyle. He enacted this vision in Geneva, which he molded "into the Protestant Rome, a model experiment in civic godliness, and the epicenter of an international

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<sup>21</sup> Janz (2008) 276-7.

<sup>22</sup> Janz (2008) 271.

<sup>23</sup> Janz (2008) 305.

<sup>24</sup> Eire (2016) 296.



world-shaking enterprise.”<sup>25</sup> Calvin’s idea of civil governance spread widely throughout Western Europe and into the Americas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Despite Calvin’s biblical interpretation being stricter than Luther’s, “Calvinism was above all a very adaptable religion... a flexible ideology that adjusted to its environment,”<sup>26</sup> which explains both regional variations in theology during Calvin’s time as well as the diversity of movements today which call themselves “Reformed” and tie their roots to John Calvin’s theology.

In the centuries following the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, Luther’s and Calvin’s ideas disseminated throughout Europe. As the Lutheran Church “spread rapidly northward into the Scandinavian countries”<sup>27</sup> following Luther’s Reformation, the Church that John Calvin founded “acquired considerable influence in the English universities, where it formed the basis for the movement known as Puritanism within and outside the Church of England; in Scotland, led by John Knox and leading to the formation of the Presbyterian movement; ...and in the Netherlands, where it provided an ideological rallying point in the quest for freedom from Catholic Spain.”<sup>28</sup> Lutheranism and the Reformed tradition traveled to America as the colonists and subsequent waves of immigrants from the aforementioned areas brought their diverse faiths with them. The influence of American culture molded these traditions into the four unique denominations that signed “A Formula of Agreement” three centuries later.

#### *The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was the sole Lutheran denomination to affirm “A Formula of Agreement” in 1997. This group had only officially formed nine years prior to the agreement, but it grew out of a merger of three denominations, the

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<sup>25</sup> Eire (2016) 298.

<sup>26</sup> Eire (2016) 314.

<sup>27</sup> Williams (2002) 83.

<sup>28</sup> Williams (2002) 99.

American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), which had been involved with the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue since the 1960s.<sup>29</sup> Formerly divided by geographic region and immigration history, these congregations merged in 1988, demonstrating the push for ecumenism within denominations as well as between them. When Lutheran groups immigrated to the United States, they formed their own “synods” of Lutheran Churches, designed to unite religious bodies that spoke the same language, inhabited the same region, and worshipped in similar ways.<sup>30</sup> By 1875, there were nearly 60 distinct synods that had formed in this way. However, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, congregations began moving towards unity as “three Norwegian synods joined to form the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America (NLCA) and... three German synods joined to form the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA).”<sup>31</sup> The National Lutheran Council, which was formed in 1918, drove many of the subsequent mergers, including the founding of the ALC as the combination of several German churches in 1930, which also came to encompass several unified Danish and Norwegian churches by the 1960s.<sup>32</sup> The Americanization of various immigrant groups led them to combine into more unified groups despite their divided national heritages.

As Lutheran Churches slowly sought unity, they reconciled their differences in heritage, practice, and biblical interpretation. However, no broad movement was made until the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS), a more conservative branch of the Lutheran tradition in America, began protesting mergers that it felt de-emphasized Scripture in favor of ecumenism.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Williams (2002) 353.

<sup>30</sup> “The Roots of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20070403112446/http://www.elca.org/communication/roots.html>, accessed 19 December 2017.

<sup>31</sup> “The Roots of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”

<sup>32</sup> “The Roots of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”

<sup>33</sup> “The Roots of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”

In 1977, the LCMS officially protested the AELC's "Call to Lutheran Union" on these grounds, which directly precipitated the union of the three more liberal groups of Lutheran Churches: the ALC, the LCA, and the AELC.<sup>34</sup> Over the next decade, hundreds of calls occurred, congregation meetings were held, and conciliatory documents were written. Each group had to vote in convention, which took a considerable amount of time in an era before communication was as simple as sending an email or Skyping into a meeting, despite each group's commitment to Lutheran unity. At the beginning of May 1987, each of the three joining churches held "closing conventions" to resolve constitutional matters, and at the turn of the year 1988, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was officially formed. The ELCA's inaugural message announced itself as "a mosaic reflecting not only the ethnic heritages of traditional Lutherans through its original churches, but also the full spectrum of American culture in which it serves, proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world."<sup>35</sup> The new Church chose to include "evangelical" in its name to reflect Martin Luther's desire to form a congregation that abides by the words of Jesus, but the denomination is considered mainline Protestantism, not born-again Christianity, in polls and censuses. The ELCA viewed the unity of the three churches as an ecumenical triumph, and more than three and a half million Americans counted themselves as members of the ELCA as of 2016.<sup>36</sup> However, the dissent still occurring from the LCMS served as a reminder of the neglected elements sacrificed for ecumenism, which will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

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<sup>34</sup> The AELC was a denomination comprised of a small number of congregations which has left the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Members of the AELC were strongly in favor of Lutheran unity. Among those who left for the AELC included many of those who had formerly taught at the chief seminary of the LCMS, Concordia Seminary, which is mentioned in Chapter Three.

<sup>35</sup> "The Roots of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America."

<sup>36</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "ELCA Facts," [elca.org](http://elca.org), accessed 19 December 2017.

The ELCA was the only Church based in the Lutheran tradition to sign “A Formula of Agreement.” The other three denominations grew out of John Calvin’s reformation movement, known as the “Reformed” tradition, generally signifying “the movement that originally had its focus in several of the Swiss city-states.”<sup>37</sup> Although they come from diverse backgrounds, the Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, and United Church of Christ all claim Calvinist roots, formed in the United States, and overcame their differences to agree upon “A Formula of Agreement.”

*The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

Presbyterianism derives its name from its hierarchical church structure, the presbytery. This structure utilizes the Greek word *presbyter* to indicate the four-part ministry John Calvin deduced from the New Testament and claimed to be the ideal church form, consisting of pastors, elders, teachers, and deacons.<sup>38</sup> The modern Presbyterian Church continues to use the structure and terminology first codified by John Knox in sixteenth-century Scotland; it meets in *sessions* with designated members at specific times of year, has a *synod* that oversees broad regions of sessions, and is governed at the highest level by the *General Assembly*.<sup>39</sup> Every iteration of the Presbyterian Church in the past five centuries has adopted a similar structure to the one founded by John Knox in the 1500s. Scottish immigrants brought this tradition with them to the colonies, and the Presbyterian Church has developed with American influence in the interceding years.

Over the years, American cultural and political diversity produced divisions and reunions in the Presbyterian Church. During the Great Awakening of the mid-1700s in New York and Pennsylvania, some Presbyterians, such as the family of William Tennent, engaged with the fiery

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<sup>37</sup> Williams (2002) 99.

<sup>38</sup> Williams (2002) 119.

<sup>39</sup> Williams (2002) 119-120.

language and dramatic faith, while others remained steadfast in traditional theology-based preaching.<sup>40</sup> The groups reconciled and formed a unified synod by the 1760s, but each new event, including independence, slavery, and interactions with other religions, shook the populace and was likely to divide the church, reflecting the Scottish American Presbyterian's tendency toward "contentiousness, the willingness of its members to split and form new groupings on matters of principle."<sup>41</sup> Despite their differences, four synods composed of sixteen presbyteries united following American independence from Great Britain to form the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA) in 1788, convened by the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, John Witherspoon.<sup>42</sup> For several decades, despite some disturbances to the unity during the Second Great Awakening, this Church remained an intact form of Presbyterianism in America.

The longest-lasting division in American Presbyterianism occurred following the Civil War (1861-1865). Reflecting the larger American conflict over slavery, the South's Presbyterian Church in the United States remained determined "to maintain a militantly conservative stance on both theological and social issues," while the Northern Presbyterians inherited the more adaptable PCUSA, which had already absorbed several minority Presbyterian groups residing in the states of the former Union.<sup>43</sup> Over a century after the conclusion of the Civil War, a 1983 resolution "managed to overcome traditional differences [between the North and South] to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA), which is today by far the dominant denominational expression of the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition in the United States."<sup>44</sup> Each time a new group

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<sup>40</sup> Williams (2002) 122.

<sup>41</sup> Williams (2002) 123.

<sup>42</sup> Williams (2002) 123.

<sup>43</sup> Williams (2002) 369.

<sup>44</sup> Williams (2002) 369.

joins the PCUSA, it is considered a new founding of the Church, but every transition has maintained the same name from the original 1788 convention and counts as a continuous progression of General Assemblies. Today's PCUSA is a continuance of the coalition formed by the 195<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 1983, and it claims nearly two million members.<sup>45</sup> Like the ELCA, the PCUSA is considered a mainline Protestant denomination, and it takes a more liberal stance than its conservative counterpart, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

The convening of the PCUSA and its subsequent iterations reflected John Calvin's initial construction of a church based on Scripture. The founding Plan of Government defined "the Scriptures as the only infallible rule of faith and practice," and it required each participating church to adopt "the confession of faith...as containing the system of doctrine taught in the holy scriptures."<sup>46</sup> This sentiment remained continuous throughout the complicated history and reconvening of the PCUSA. When the Northern and Southern divisions reconvened in 1983, they adopted a document entitled "Historic Principles, Conscience and Church Government." This document recognizes its heritage in the 1788 "Form of Government," although it admits changes influenced by American culture.<sup>47</sup> As would be expected from a document that claims to draw upon Scripture as the source of authority, the "Historical Principles" abundantly cites the Bible, including chapters that were favorites of John Calvin, like Galatians, I Corinthians, and Acts. It also claims, "The basis of Presbyterian polity is theological,"<sup>48</sup> reflecting Calvin's tendency to engage with theological questions as the primary foundation for the Reformed Church. However, in contrast to Calvin's belief that Scripture stands alone, the PCUSA understands that "the

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<sup>45</sup> "History of the Church," Presbyterian Historical Society: The National Archives of the PC(USA), <https://www.history.pcusa.org/history-online/presbyterian-history/history-church>, accessed 19 December 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013) 49.

<sup>47</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 195<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, "Historic Principles, Conscience and Church Government" (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1983) 1.

<sup>48</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 195<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1983) 5.

church must interpret Scripture and establish the general rules by which it operates.”<sup>49</sup> While this statement provides an opening for dissent from more conservative and less ecumenically-oriented branches of Presbyterianism, it was instrumental in allowing the Church to be inclusive, survive in a different world from the one in which it was formed, and open itself to ecumenical dialogue as epitomized by the discussion preceding “A Formula of Agreement.”

### *The Reformed Church in America*

Like the PCUSA, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the third signer of “A Formula of Agreement” developed from Calvinist roots. Many of the people who consider themselves “Reformed” rather than “Presbyterian” are descendants of the Dutch who immigrated to New York in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>50</sup> Although German Reformed immigrants also came to the American colonies in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many of these congregations merged with Lutheran churches because they valued their national heritage and language above their religious tradition, especially since it lacked a formal hierarchical structure at the time.<sup>51</sup> Not until 1747 did the Dutch Reformed Church establish independence from the presbytery in Amsterdam, and it took another several decades to establish a fully-formed church and seminary. By 1792, the RCA “took its formal place in the roster of independent American denominations,” although they did not adopt that current name departing them from their Dutch heritage until 1867.<sup>52</sup> The RCA was the smallest of the churches to sign “A Formula of Agreement,” with approximately 200,000 members as of 2016, a significant decline from the turn of the millennium.<sup>53</sup> Like the aforementioned churches, the RCA has a closely-related conservative branch, the Christian

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<sup>49</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 195<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1983) 10.

<sup>50</sup> Williams (2002) 124-5.

<sup>51</sup> Williams (2002) 125.

<sup>52</sup> Williams (2002) 126.

<sup>53</sup> RCA Consistorial Report, “Church Statistical Data,” *Reformed Church in America*, <http://crf.rca.org/public>, accessed 23 December 2017.

Reformed Church, which separated in 1857 as a protest to what they considered “excessive liberalism of RCA practice.”<sup>54</sup> When used as a comparison tool, this branch reveals the both the Americanization of the RCA and the distance it has created from its Calvinist roots.

As has been the trend with the mainline Protestant denominations that participated in the ecumenical dialogue leading up to “A Formula of Agreement,” the RCA’s founding documents respect the biblical adherence of its forefather, John Calvin. In the 1792, 1833, and 1874 constitutions, the language describing candidacy for ministry, administration of the sacraments, and establishment of ecclesiastical hierarchy is legalistic, but references often the “Sacred Scripture” and the mission of ministering to God’s Word.<sup>55</sup> These Constitutions also include the beliefs that tie all RCA congregations together today, such as the confession of three creeds, Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian, and the four “standards of unity:” the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort, and Confession of Belhar.<sup>56</sup> The confessions and standards of unity relate the RCA not only to Christian history more generally, as demonstrated by the creeds that date to the fourth century, but also to their Reformed heritage. The four standards of unity seek to unite RCA churches, and they also connect the church more broadly to other Reformed churches that link their tradition to the documents of the Synod of Dort.<sup>57</sup> Overall, the doctrine the RCA practices lacks much distinction from other mainline Protestant, and especially Reformed, belief, even in its interpretation of Scripture and historical documents, and therefore it is unsurprising that it signed an ecumenical agreement.

### *The United Church of Christ*

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<sup>54</sup> Williams (2002) 126.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Tanjore Corwin, *A Digest of Constitutional and Synodical Legislation of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: The Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1906).

<sup>56</sup> Reformed Church in America, “Beliefs,” [rca.org](http://rca.org), accessed 23 December 2017.

<sup>57</sup> The Synod of Dort met in 1618-1619 and served as “an assembly of Calvinist divines held in the heavily Reformed Netherlands.” Williams (2002) 95-96. The RCA demonstrates its recent Dutch heritage by holding the documents approved by this council as the core of their beliefs.



The fourth group to sign “A Formula of Agreement” was the United Church of Christ (UCC). Puritanism, which grew in England based on John Calvin’s beliefs, served as the precursor for the UCC. While the Puritans were one of the most well-known denominations in the American colonies and famous for their protests against the Church of England, Puritanism itself “died long ago as an organized religious impulse, and the New England churches and congregations that had once espoused it are now usually affiliated either with the liberal United Church of Christ or the ultra-liberal Unitarian-Universalist Association.”<sup>58</sup> The UCC formed in 1957 as a combination of several formerly-Puritan communities in New England, including Congregational churches, the German Reformed Church, the Hungarian Reformed Church, and the Evangelical Synod of North America, demonstrating how “doctrinal differences were subordinated to political unity.”<sup>59</sup> This union is distinct from the other bodies that signed “A Formula of Agreement” because it served to combine distinct traditions, Congregational, Reformed, and Evangelical, into one body,<sup>60</sup> rather than striving to transcend regional or heritage differences between Churches that ascribed to the same religious tradition. Its mission to unify three distinct traditions reflects the UCC’s continuing mission of ecumenism, and it also explains the complex structure of UCC governance. While the congregational aspect of Puritanism still dominates the UCC today, as demonstrated by the value placed on the local congregation’s ability to decide for itself how it views issues like euthanasia, homosexuality, and ordaining women, the UCC also incorporates a hierarchy similar to the Presbyterian churches.<sup>61</sup> However,

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<sup>58</sup> Williams (2002) 118.

<sup>59</sup> Williams (2002) 125.

<sup>60</sup> General Assembly of the United Church of Christ, “Message to the Churches from the Uniting General Synod,” in *Minutes of the Uniting General Synod of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, 1957), [http://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy\\_url/181/message-to-the-churches-from-uniting-synod.pdf?1418423546](http://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/181/message-to-the-churches-from-uniting-synod.pdf?1418423546), accessed 26 March 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Williams (2002) 371.

the higher levels of authority are restricted to making broad policy decisions for the denomination, not for local congregations.

The divisions within the United Church of Christ that result from its congregational nature are often overshadowed by collective agreement on national policies, especially those regarding ecumenism. Interfaith conversation features strongly in the UCC belief system, which many more conservative denominations would argue inherently reflects a rejection of biblical literalism. The Statement of Faith, adopted by the UCC General Assembly in 1959, as well as the unified statements of belief, reflect a generically Christian and liberal understanding of the world. Only in supporting their statement, which claims that the UCC is “called to be a united and uniting church,” does the belief summary quote Scripture, a verse from John.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the 2017 constitution lacks any of the biblical references that Calvin made plentiful in his governing documents for Geneva. This change may reflect the more practical components of governing a church, such as those related to official recognition and tax status. It may also relate to the assumption of biblical basis that precludes direct statement of cited chapters or verses, the influence of American non-religious political structure on the governing documents of religious organizations, or a commitment to ecumenism that strives to be inclusive even in Church documents. Although these options are conjecture, the UCC’s commitment to ecumenism is a reality. An entire section of their website under “About Us” is devoted to “Ecumenical and Interfaith Partners.”<sup>63</sup> This section contains reflections on the calling to work with other people of faith, not limited to other Protestant or Christian denominations, but including Jewish and Muslim relations as well. The UCC appears to walk the most ecumenical path of the four signing

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<sup>62</sup> United Church of Christ, “What We Believe,” [ucc.org](http://ucc.org), accessed 29 December 2017.

<sup>63</sup> United Church of Christ, “Ecumenical and Interfaith Partners,” [ucc.org](http://ucc.org), accessed 29 December 2017.

churches of “A Formula of Agreement,” taking Jesus’ message to “love your neighbor as yourself” even more literally than any early reformers could have imagined.

Each of the church bodies that signed “A Formula of Agreement” have a history of ecumenism. They formed from a series of mergers and unity agreements within their own denominations, and each is considered a mainline Protestant denomination. Furthermore, the ELCA, PCUSA, RCA, and UCC all fall on the liberal-to-moderate half of the ideological spectrum, and therefore are more adaptable to the changes occurring in modern times. This is reflected in their interpretation of Scripture. While the Reformed traditions grew out of the biblical literalism of John Calvin, the place of the Bible today is more of a guiding force for acceptance and openness, rather than a strict manual for determining one’s lifestyle. As discussions progressed within the unity documents that formed each branch of Reformed and Lutheran history, and in the discussions that culminated in “A Formula of Agreement,” Scripture stopped dividing the denominations, but instead became secondary to the desire for Christian unity in modern America. The documents published to summarize four decades of conversations between these four Churches demonstrate this shift in the primacy of Scripture, and the next chapter focuses on an analysis of this development.

## Chapter Two

### Denominations in Dialogue: The Discussion Preceding “A Formula of Agreement”

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Col. 3:13-14

“A Formula of Agreement” is the first document of its kind in America, but it has a history reaching back to decades of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue. This dialogue sought to remedy historical antagonism and theological differences in favor of recognizing the potential for unity in the current social and cultural setting. Throughout the first century following the Reformation, the conversation between Lutheran and Reformed branches had largely been antagonistic, and the groups failed to reach agreement on major issues, such as the Eucharist and justification. Most of these differences stemmed from contrary interpretations of Scripture, or from stereotyped images of each group and their theologies. However, when Lutheran-Reformed dialogue began in America in the 1960s, the conversation adopted a more amenable tone, as the participating groups sought agreement and the resolution of historical differences. This attempt at unity assumed the term “dialogue” rather than “debate” to describe the proceedings in an effort to promote mutual respect, open-mindedness, and anticipation of a new path towards truth that draws the denominations together.<sup>64</sup>

With the goal of unity in mind, the dialogue resulting in “A Formula of Agreement” took place in three parts. The first series (1962-1966), published under the title *Marburg Revisited*, was an exposition of the main differences in Lutheran and Reformed theology, and sought to evaluate whether agreement was possible. Once it had been determined that the main

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<sup>64</sup> *Marburg Revisited: A Reexamination of Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, ed. Paul C. Empie and James I. McCord (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966) 39.

disagreements were resolvable, *An Invitation to Action*, the second publication which summarized the second and third series of dialogue (1972-1974 and 1981-1983, respectively), further reconciled divisive issues and made direct statements calling for the involved churches to take identifiable steps towards unity. Finally, *A Common Calling* summarized the final series of dialogue (1992), which the newly-formed ELCA called to resolve its final concerns. Collectively, these reflections demonstrate how differences in scriptural interpretation were deemphasized in favor of a common understanding and mission among Protestant denominations in the twentieth century.

When the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue began in mid-twentieth century America, it was unclear how the path towards the goal of unity would progress, or if it would at all. Between 1962 and 1966, a series of conversations took place between representatives of the North American Area of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order and the U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation with the express goal of “explor[ing] the theological relations between Lutheran and Reformed churches to discover to what extent the differences which have divided these communions in the past still constitute obstacles to mutual understanding.”<sup>65</sup> The discussions resulted in a series of pamphlets which enabled comparison between the Lutheran and Reformed traditional takes on theological subjects, including the relationship between confession and Scripture, and law and gospel. They also analyzed their differing interpretations of the Eucharist, justification, and ethics. Each perspective was carefully considered and summarized during a meeting in Princeton, New Jersey, in February 1966, which also sought to resolve any unanswered questions or lingering ambiguities. Four years of exposition culminated in the text of *Marburg Revisited: A*

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<sup>65</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) iv.

*Reexamination of Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, which was affirmed by the two aforementioned national bodies and distributed to their seminaries and officials nationwide.

The perspectives published in *Marburg Revisited* sought to examine the historical topics of debate between Lutheran and Reformed representative, and how they relate to modern American society and culture. The first issue at hand was perhaps the most influential aspect of each tradition, and the one which fostered the most basic foundation of disagreement: gospel, confession,<sup>66</sup> and Scripture. Warren A. Quanbeck (1917-1979), of the ELCA-affiliated Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, and George S. Hendry (d. 1994), a Reformed representative from Princeton Theological Seminary, each published their thoughts on these subjects. Quanbeck was raised in the Minnesotan Lutheran tradition, where he attended Augsburg Theological Seminary and became a pastor in the American Lutheran Church.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, Hendry was born in Scotland and raised in the Reformed tradition, becoming a Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary renowned for being “consistently centered on the gospel,” a trait which would make John Calvin proud.<sup>68</sup> Each, therefore, was raised and thoroughly educated in their respective traditions, and yet both elected to participate in a conference to bridge the gap between the Lutherans and the Reformed. Their two perspectives both embrace the centrality of Scripture, a similar image of Jesus, and human interaction with God in daily life, and despite different traditional language in these fields and different emphases placed on confession, the consensus of this aspect of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue was that unity was a possibility.

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<sup>66</sup> Confession in this sense refers not to the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance, but instead to the confession of the Lutheran or Reformed tradition, which serves to unify their interpretation of Scripture, praise of God, and statement of faith; for example, the Augsburg Confession, or the Westminster Confession of Faith.

<sup>67</sup> “Warren Quanbeck, 62, Of Lutheran Seminaries,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/11/13/archives/warren-quanbeck-62-of-lutheran-seminaries.html>, published 13 November 1979, accessed 26 March 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, “George S. Hendry: A Tribute,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary Library, 1994) 47.

Since Martin Luther posited *sola scriptura* as a key component of his theology, the value the Lutheran perspective continues to place on it today is unsurprising. In his exposition on “Gospel, Confession, and Scripture,” Quanbeck emphasizes the scriptural basis of the Augsburg Confession of 1530, as well as of other beliefs common among the early Protestant reformers. He delves into a reflection on the Gospel as the Word of God, at once prophetic, apostolic, and descriptive of Jesus’ life and the example by which humans should live. He proceeds to make the popular Lutheran distinction between the law and the gospel in Scripture, which stems from Martin Luther’s idea that “[w]here the law gives an encounter with the God of judgment, the gospel gives a knowledge of the God of love.”<sup>69</sup> This relationship indicates a core belief of Lutheran theology: while humans constantly sin and fall short of God’s expectations set forth in biblical law, God’s redeeming grace comforts each person who has faith.

The belief in condemnation and redemption evident in Scripture contributes to Lutheran confessions historically and today. Quanbeck interprets Lutheran confession, as epitomized by the Augsburg Confession of 1530, as doxology, hermeneutic, and a formulation of truth. As doxology, or a formula for praising God through the liturgy, confessions have united religious communities not only in each time period but also longitudinally. The way Lutherans currently use their confession of faith through liturgy is a continuation of this method “whose central thrust is the praise and glorification of God.”<sup>70</sup> Similarly, the confession gives a common hermeneutic, or way of interpreting God’s word. In each interpretation of confession, Quanbeck uses examples from history, either during Jesus’ time, the Jewish communities that predated him, or the Christian groups that arose shortly thereafter. This focus creates continuity across centuries of Christian history, positioning the Lutheran Church and its confession as the logical

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<sup>69</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 10.

<sup>70</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 12.

conclusion of these years. The unifying element throughout is that “Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm.”<sup>71</sup> Given this continuous emphasis on Scripture, Lutheran confession serves as an interpretative tool that enables people today to access the truth in the Bible and relate to theological tradition that has attempted to do the same.

Throughout Quanbeck’s text, it is clear that the Lutheran tradition sees Scripture as an enduring central compass, the basis for both its common confession and its daily interactions in the world, but he admits that Scripture plays a different role in modern life from its role in communities contemporary with Jesus Christ or Martin Luther. This reflection on the Lutheran value placed on Scripture takes a turn into biblical relativism when Quanbeck incorporates modern scholarship. When Quanbeck introduces his reflection on the Gospel, he acknowledges that “the problems of the twentieth century differ greatly from those of the sixteenth. We cannot stand pat on quotations from the Reformers or the confessions, but must speak to the questions that are being raised today.”<sup>72</sup> His final thoughts in his text demonstrate modern scholarship’s influence on his perception of Lutheran tradition. In the modern era, the Bible is interpreted through a historical-critical lens. This lens requires acknowledgement of “the fully human character of the Bible,” which “is given through the historical witness of men” and can therefore be fallible and subject to the cultural and social influences of when it was written.<sup>73</sup> Quanbeck repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of critical scholarship when reading the Bible, which is ironically a reflection of his own cultural and social influence. For liberal Christians, as Quanbeck is, Scripture represents the Word of God as depicted by human interpretation. Therefore, proper reading and application today must not only acknowledge this fact, but also

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<sup>71</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 17.

<sup>72</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 20.



seek to discern the truth of the Word by incorporating linguistic, historical, and sociological analysis. It is this perspective, influenced by American academic tendencies, which redefines the claim to Scripture as the core of religious belief by allowing for departure from Martin Luther and John Calvin's original interpretations in favor of a reinterpretation of Scripture for the modern ecumenical era.

Proving Quanbeck's contention that Lutheran and Reformed churches have maintained "a common emphasis upon the centrality of the gospel as the life-giving and renewing power in the church,"<sup>74</sup> Hendry's reflection from the Reformed perspective places similar authority on Scripture alone. Throughout his text, also titled "Gospel, Confession, and Scripture," Hendry seems less focused on Scripture and modern interpretation than Quanbeck, and far more concerned with the differences between Lutheran and Reformed confession. Despite reading the same Scripture and commonly valuing its authority, Hendry takes an aggressive stance against the Lutheran confession. He posits that confessions should serve as a means of "instruction of the people in the evangelical faith which they confessed" and as "clarification of the church's mind concerning the faith which is confessed and the definition of its position on questions in dispute."<sup>75</sup> These two categories can be denominated as evangelical and constitutional, respectively. Hendry contends that most Lutheran confessions fall into the first category, which has "[n]o formal statement on the authority of Scripture," so it must be "presupposed."<sup>76</sup> In contrast, the authority of Scripture is clearly delineated in the Reformed constitutional confessions. In his discussion of further differences between Lutheran and Reformed confessions, Hendry proposes that the distinctions draw upon the differences between Luther and

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<sup>74</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 27.

<sup>76</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 31.

Calvin on the matter of faith more broadly. While to Luther faith was a feeling in the heart produced by the Holy Spirit, Calvin stressed a “proper object of faith” that rested in the express authority of Scripture.<sup>77</sup> Hendry concludes, “There is need for clarification of the status of the Scriptural principle in relation to the evangelical [Lutheran] faith.”<sup>78</sup> From the Lutheran perspective, this conclusion appears to be a willful ignorance of the value Lutheran confession places on Scripture, as evidenced by the entirety of Quanbeck’s reflection. However, Hendry’s point delves into the issues raised when Scripture is continually reinterpreted in relation to changing scholarship and historical relativism.

Although the Lutheran and Reformed representatives seem to have different ideas of how to interpret Scripture and their confessions, this section on “Gospel, Confession, and Scripture” concludes with a summary statement that promotes the continued search for a common understanding. This statement claims, “Both Lutheran and Reformed churches are evangelical,” both confess “the biblical concept of justification by grace through faith alone,” and both “affirm the supreme authority of scripture.”<sup>79</sup> A few caveats remain, such as “some question concerning the place and meaning of law in the new life [of faith in Christ]” and the fact that “[t]he confessions originated in different geographical and historical situations and they use different vocabularies.”<sup>80</sup> The final meeting in 1966 sought to resolve the confusion surrounding these continued disagreements. They found that there are dangers on both sides, which may result in either Biblicism or confessionalism; therefore, the final path for moving forward in Lutheran-Reformed dialogue should walk a sort of *via media*, a compromise that avoids either extreme. Furthermore, they found that “a confessional statement allows for the tolerable diversity of

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<sup>77</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 34-35.

<sup>78</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 36.

<sup>79</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 37-38.

<sup>80</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 37-38.

theological conviction that is to be found within as well as between our churches,” even when the confessions are seemingly in contrast.<sup>81</sup> Overall, the evaluation of gospel, confession, and Scripture concludes that the differences that exist between Lutheran and Reformed interpretation should not deter further conversation relating to these subjects.

Once differences in scriptural interpretation and confessional authority had been satisfactorily handled, the conversation represented in *Marburg Revisited* progressed to identifying true differences in the Eucharist. This section touches on historical controversies, interpretations, and debates, but the primary focus rests in determining whether the differences between the two traditions are really as pronounced as the stereotypes claim them to be. As in the previous section, each topic features commentary from renowned theologians representing the Lutheran and the Reformed perspectives. While Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther, and John Calvin each interpreted the Eucharist in a different light, the conversation between these representatives proves that modern Protestants in America are less concerned with the literal or figurative presence of Christ in the bread and wine of communion, and more with the fellowship created by common and open participation in the sacrament.

The historical focus of these scholars elucidates the changes that have resulted in today’s full communion agreement. Although each meeting of Reformed and Lutheran representatives in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries failed to reach an agreement on whether Christ was present in the Eucharist or whether it was merely symbolic remembrance of his sacrifice, there was some agreement in the early days of the Reformation. In “Little Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord,” published in 1540, Calvin wrote,

We all then confess with one mouth, that on receiving the sacrament in faith, according to the ordinance of the Lord, we are truly made partakers of the proper substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. How that is done some may deduce better, and explain

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<sup>81</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 181.

more clearly than others. Be this as it may, on the one hand, in order to exclude all carnal fancies, we must raise our hearts upwards to heaven, not thinking that our Lord Jesus is so debased as to be enclosed under some corruptible elements; and, on the other hand, not to impair the efficacy of this holy ordinance, we must hold that it is made effectual by the secret and miraculous power of God, and that the Spirit of God is the bond of participation, this being the reason why it is called spiritual.<sup>82</sup>

To this, Luther responded, “I might have entrusted the whole affair of this controversy to him from the beginning. If my opponents had done the like, we should have been reconciled.”<sup>83</sup>

Although Luther was fond of jokes and might have been mocking Calvin, taking his words as they were written gives precedent for the much later agreement that began with the evaluation of doctrine in *Marburg Revisited*.

Throughout the section on the Eucharist, the authors reference these early reformers and their debates, but their core discussion revolves around Christology, which examines the personhood of Jesus Christ, and its influence on interpretation of the Eucharist. Deciding whether Jesus is present on earth or solely at the right hand of God, and the distinction between the physical and spiritual presences of Jesus, is central to the discussion of the Eucharist. If Jesus exists only in Heaven, then he cannot be present in the bread and wine, yet perhaps he may be spiritually present instead of physically. The discussion in these chapters is densely theological and esoteric, and while it makes sense to disseminate it to seminaries, it is rather inaccessible for the layperson. Ultimately, the dialogue concludes that, in regards to Christology, Reformed and Lutheran groups agree on the unity between dual natures of Jesus, human and divine, but they disagree on “the ubiquity... of the humanity of Christ.”<sup>84</sup> This led to the major argument surrounding the Eucharist, in which “the Reformed thought of the body of Christ as being in heaven and accordingly maintained that Christ is present in the Sacrament ‘spiritually,’ while the

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<sup>82</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 44.

<sup>83</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 44.

<sup>84</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 64.

Lutherans contended that he is present ‘bodily’ and reintroduced Luther’s early formulation of ubiquity to show the possibility of a corporeal presence.”<sup>85</sup> Debate also surrounded the tension between the Lutheran idea that nonbelievers could receive the sacrament, while the Reformed believed the sacrament only became true communion when taken by a faithful participant.<sup>86</sup> The distinction between spiritual and bodily presence and disagreement on the significance of *manducatio impiorum* (“eating by the impious”) were the driving issues surrounding the Eucharist in 1960s Lutheran-Reformed dialogue.

Despite different interpretations of the Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, the Lutheran and Reformed participants in this section of the discussion were able to make significant progress on the path toward intercommunion. Many of the issues that dominated historical debates were found to be a “misunderstanding between Lutherans and Reformed [that made] their differences appear to be greater than they actually were,” often due to their “conservatively adhering to [or radically rejecting] practices which suggested or expressed what they denied.”<sup>87</sup> Instead of allowing scriptural interpretation to divide them, as in the “Gospel, Confession, and Scripture” section, the representatives discussing the Eucharist allowed Scripture to bring them together. Rooted in the description of the Lord’s Supper in I Corinthians 11 is the idea that followers of Christ are “faithful brethren” who should experience “the loving fellowship of *ecclesia*” together.<sup>88</sup> Anchoring discussion in this idea of community, rather than a more divisive passage like John 6 which Zwingli used to prove a solely symbolic interpretation of the Eucharist, allows for progress toward the goal of intercommunion. In this way, the authors confirm the idea that “[t]he Sacrament is the communion of the believers not only with their

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<sup>85</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 65-66.

<sup>86</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 42.

<sup>87</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 67.

<sup>88</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 74.

Lord..., but also with each other.”<sup>89</sup> In 1960s America, mainline Protestants were a community divided by historical theological disputes that continued to prevent different Protestant denominations from sharing in remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice together. These conversations represent an attempt to remedy that division.

The texts on the Eucharist reflect some enduring issues between Lutheran and Reformed interpretations of the Eucharist. The disagreement on how Christ is present in the Eucharist remains, as does disagreement on the influence of faith on the presence of Christ. These differences are rooted in scriptural interpretation, but the participants in the dialogue conclude that they no longer are significant enough to continue dividing the denominations. Instead, the parties appealed to an interpretation of Scripture that emphasizes community and brotherhood as a reason for unity. They also found that many of the differences in their interpretation were based on historical antagonism between their two denominations, rather than on the meaning of the sacrament. These differences require “constant re-examination of [the groups’] theological-formulations in the light of the word of God,” of which this series of conversations is one.<sup>90</sup> As a result of this re-examination of the Eucharist, the Lutheran and Reformed participants decided, “Intercommunion between churches... is not only permissible but demanded wherever there is agreement in the gospel. Such agreement means proclamation of the same gospel as the good news of God’s reconciling work in Christ rather than uniformity in theological formulation.”<sup>91</sup> Ultimately, the participants concluded that since both Lutheran and Reformed Churches proclaim the same redeeming Word of God, their differences in interpretation should be minimized in favor of unity. Again, this decision excludes more conservative branches of each denomination,

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<sup>89</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 95.

<sup>90</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 103.

<sup>91</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 183.

which tend to hold steadfast to traditional and historical interpretations of Scripture. However, this task force found the historical differences to be irrelevant in today's society, and necessary to undermine in the search for ecumenism, and thus concluded that there is no longer significant reason to prevent further efforts in Lutheran-Reformed dialogue.

Although the Eucharist was determined to be an area in which agreement was possible, justification has historically been an equally divisive area of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue. Calvin followed Luther's "salvation by grace through faith alone" to what he viewed as its inevitable conclusion, predestination. Centuries of Reformed followers have developed their own translations of what it means for God to have predetermined the elect to be saved and others to be eternally damned, and predestination today looks very different from its original Calvinist form. However, much of Reformed theology stems from this idea of predestination and the absolute depravity of man.<sup>92</sup> In contrast, the Lutheran tradition adopts a more positive view of salvation and of God, the product of Luther's long struggle with sin and falling short of God's expectations, but ultimately finding forgiveness by grace through faith. In their sections on justification, sanctification, law, and gospel, the representatives in *Marburg Revisited* sought to examine these conflicting views on God and humanity, and whether they were truly church dividing.

Reformed theologians in this section held fast to the idea of absolute depravity, but Lutherans attempted to accommodate that belief so it may be incorporated into a unified church. In "Justification and Sanctification: Liturgy and Ethics," Henry Stob (1936-1996) contributed the Reformed perspective. Raised in "a devout Calvinistic family and educated from the beginning in the Christian day schools that are interwoven into the total religious perspective of his church

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<sup>92</sup> Janz (2008) 271.

and community,”<sup>93</sup> Stob was one of the more conservative Reformed perspectives in the dialogue. He argued in his section on justification that “the God of Calvinism... is the imperious law-giver whose will must be unconditionally obeyed; he is not a God before whom it is possible to ‘sin boldly.’”<sup>94</sup> This remark against Martin Luther’s famous words, “Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe even more boldly in Christ and rejoice,” seems to be an attempt to antagonize the Lutheran representatives in the dialogue, yet perhaps it was an effort to elucidate the different interpretations of God in the Reformed versus the Lutheran tradition. The rest of Stob’s text speaks conciliatorily of early Reformers as a whole. Collectively, Protestants since the Reformation have “kept the governance of [the created world] in the hands of the loving creator” and agreed on the idea that “all that God means or can mean for men who are lost and undone is contained in Christ: he and he alone is our salvation.”<sup>95</sup> By identifying these unifying views of creation and Christ, rather than focusing on divisive interpretations of Scripture, Stob paves the path for agreement on justification. As with the discussion on the Eucharist, this section strives for an understanding that will facilitate the *koinonia*, community or fellowship, of Christians broadly.<sup>96</sup> Although Stob’s Reformed roots surface in occasionally combative ways, his overall message proclaims unity, and the lack of mention of predestination furthers his ecumenical tone.

The Lutheran response on justification and salvation comes from Conrad Bergendoff (1895-1997), of Augustana College, and holds a similarly ecumenical message. Bergendoff was raised by Swedish Lutheran parents, and his education took him from his home in Connecticut to Chicago, Oxford, and Berlin.<sup>97</sup> Reflecting the intellectual and spiritual influence of these various

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<sup>93</sup> “Stob Family: Henry Stob,” *WordPress Blog*, <http://stobfamily.com/henry-stob/>, copyright 2018, accessed 27 March 2018.

<sup>94</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 107.

<sup>95</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 108-109.

<sup>96</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 114.

<sup>97</sup> “Conrad John Emmanuel Bergendoff (1895-1997),” *Augustana College*, <http://augustana.net/x18013.xml>, accessed 27 March 2018.



cultures, Bergendoff uses language in his section of *Marburg Revisited* that reflects a more ecumenical and globally-conscious stance towards the conversation. He acknowledges that the Lutheran Church is a liturgical one, more in line with the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Churches than the Reformed ones, yet he argues that this liturgical worship is merely habit and tradition rather than an unchanging belief that would prevent unity.<sup>98</sup> Bergendoff further focuses on how society influences ecumenism. In the changing world today, he claims, “We need not go out of our own country to learn how social and racial attitudes of the community decide what is preached, and not preached.”<sup>99</sup> Since American Lutheran and Reformed congregations exist under the same societal influence and in the same communities, their preaching has merged to reflect this situation, rather than remaining steadfast in the historical preaching style of their diverse traditions. Following the agreement that preaching is the most accessible and influential way of receiving the Word of God, Bergendoff asserts that the Churches are no longer as different as they think they are. Similarly, since “the Church is governed alone by God’s Word,”<sup>100</sup> and the two Churches proclaim the same gospel, as decided in the conversation on the Eucharist, the Churches have a common path to unity through preaching and the Word of God, despite different interpretations of Scripture.

Key to Lutheran interpretation of Scripture is the contrast between law and gospel. The Reformed interpretation of this division takes a looser stance, unlike the Luther’s staunch advocacy for his position that “the biblical theology of the cross has been surrendered in favor of a theology of glory.”<sup>101</sup> Reformed theologians instead occasionally suffer from “archaism in

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<sup>98</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 124.

<sup>99</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 125.

<sup>100</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 127.

<sup>101</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 128.

theology,”<sup>102</sup> in which “attention is focused upon the problem of man’s sin and his guilt”<sup>103</sup> as portrayed by Calvin, which may not be relevant to the current world. The division between law and gospel, which influences justification and sanctification, causes Lutherans to focus more greatly on gospel, while those with their roots in Calvinism herald the law above all else. Again, these differences stem from scriptural interpretation. However, the community participating in the dialogue on these subjects found that “these differences are semantic and arise out of different patterns of theological thought... in part due to the historical situations in which Luther and Calvin did their theological work,” and therefore do not preclude “progress... toward mutual understanding and resolution of... differences.”<sup>104</sup> As in the previous evaluations of the historical issues in Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, the representatives of each tradition identified the differences in opinion on law, gospel, justification, and sanctification, proclaimed that they stem from different interpretations of Scripture, and yet concluded that the issues were not substantial enough to prevent further action in the work of ecumenical dialogue between the traditions.

The final section of *Marburg Revisited* concludes this era of dialogue by discussing the ethics of each religion and its relation to modern society. This section is the crux of the argument for ecumenism: society influences religion so greatly today that historical divisions have been dissolved, especially those related to scriptural interpretation, which the sixteenth-century Reformers so greatly valued. In the decades leading up to this 1960s dialogue, the field of the “social sciences” had exploded, evaluating institutionalism and other topics related to church life.<sup>105</sup> Fortunately, there were many benefits to this new phase of scholarship. While such scholarship called many aspects of religion into question, “[t]he development of an ecumenical

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<sup>102</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 142.

<sup>103</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 146

<sup>104</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 152.

<sup>105</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 153.

approach to theology has also been aided by the increased amount of historical information available.”<sup>106</sup> Sociologists or psychologists also scrutinized the stereotyped images of a “Lutheran” or a “Presbyterian” and how these images are products of history yet continue to divide the two groups today.<sup>107</sup> Given this reevaluation of image, the Reformed representative for this section argued, “While it remains true that the denomination retains a certain character, a unitive power over all its members, it is now also true that within each denomination the spectrum of views tends to be more openly recognized, the attraction across denomination boundaries to likeminded Christians in other groups.”<sup>108</sup> There is no better way to summarize the drive for ecumenism among mid-twentieth-century Protestants.

In the sixteenth century, with the Reformation occurring in different areas across Europe, subject to increasing levels of nationalism, with Scripture at the core of their division, unity was nearly impossible. Yet in America today, Protestants share the same ethical code in the same cultural environment, and Scripture is used to support preaching, morality, and other key issues rather than establish differences between groups. Stereotyped images of the “Cheerful Lutheran” and “Puritan Calvinist”<sup>109</sup> are subsumed by the belief that “[S]cripture has to do with personas and communities of persons, and with certain patterns or styles of life,”<sup>110</sup> which the groups participating in this dialogue have in common. The core of this ecumenical dialogue rests in the changed world Protestants occupy today. While Luther and Calvin are still revered as founders of their movements, and their teachings still partially inform theological instruction, Protestants under the influence of academic work and American culture recognize that “Luther’s recovery of

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<sup>106</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 189.

<sup>107</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 154.

<sup>108</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 155.

<sup>109</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 163.

<sup>110</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 160.

the gospel was not a recovery of the whole gospel—no man’s is—but of the essential gospel for his day. So Luther and Calvin are speaking to us today from a kind of tangential situation, relevant at points but not correspondent in certain key areas.”<sup>111</sup> After elucidating the issues that have divided Lutheran and Reformed churches throughout history, representatives in *Marburg Revisited* decided on unity instead. Although they identify remaining issues, they believe none prevent further discussion and reconciliation. Conversations would continue in the direction of agreement, as these representatives exemplify their role as “reformers still.”<sup>112</sup>

In between the first and third series of American Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, published respectively in *Marburg Revisited* and *An Invitation to Action*, the “Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue II” and the “Leuenberg Agreement” occurred. These events were summarized in *An Invitation to Action*, and both contributed to the third series of American Lutheran-Reformed dialogue. Series II of the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue served as an expansion of the attempts at reconciliation in *Marburg Revisited*. It focused specifically on “the sources of diversity of theological understanding and... the differences of ecclesiastical life style that play into the separation between Lutheran and Reformed churches.”<sup>113</sup> This discussion’s focus on church identity, the Eucharist, and obstacles to fellowship proves that the conclusions of *Marburg Revisited* that advocated for unity above scriptural differences were unsatisfying to many members of the participating groups. However, as with *Marburg Revisited*, they strove to “assess the consensus and remaining differences in the theology and life of the participating churches as they bear upon the teaching of the Gospel in the current situation.”<sup>114</sup> Similarly to the representatives in Series I,

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<sup>111</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 163.

<sup>112</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 164.

<sup>113</sup> *An Invitation to Action: The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series III, 1981-1983*, ed. James E. Andrews and Joseph A. Burgess (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 55.

<sup>114</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 54.

Series II representatives identified the differences between Lutheran and Reformed denominations, yet concluded that the differences should not be church-dividing. The dialogue posited that the dividing issues of the sixteenth century needed to be re-interpreted to fit the current American situation, which called for a unified view of Jesus Christ rather than disunity based on interpretative differences. This discussion also agreed with *Marburg Revisited* on linguistic differences being the basis of disagreement, rather than distinct theological discord.

The Series II dialogue extended the discussion from theology into the realm of practice, especially regarding the Eucharist. While “most of the Reformed churches have for a long time taught and practiced Communion open to all Christians... [in Lutheran churches], the practice varies in individual congregations,” which the participants in the dialogue identified as a potential opening for altar fellowship.<sup>115</sup> If the churches are already flexible in who visits their table during communion, they argued, then the path to sharing the Lord’s Supper officially is already available. The dialogue then made the distinction between “the *doctrine* of the Lord’s Supper expressed in their respective Confessions of faith, [and how] in *practice* they are saying that the confessional differences concerning the *mode* of Christ’s presence ought not to be regarded as obstacles to pulpit and altar fellowship.”<sup>116</sup> This distinction provided the crux of all further argument for common fellowship, and the greatest variation from the original works of Luther and Calvin. While to the early reformers, doctrine held the utmost authority and represented the reason for all disagreement, the twentieth-century reformers participating in Lutheran-Reformed dialogue concluded that practice undermined doctrine. More than any other decision in the series of dialogues, this conclusion proves how scriptural interpretation, which originally determined the Churches’ respective doctrines, no longer defined them as much as

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<sup>115</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 57.

<sup>116</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 57-58.

their practices, which had been influenced by American culture. The search for unity in the modern era trumped doctrinal differences and led to the call for “a fresh hearing of the gospel declared in the Holy Scripture,”<sup>117</sup> instead of the version that had divided the two Protestant branches for centuries. The unifying theme was supported by an agreement across the Atlantic Ocean that progressed Lutheran-Reformed dialogue far beyond what the American delegations could imagine.

In the 1970s, while Series II of the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue was occurring in America, European Lutheran and Reformed churches entered into a groundbreaking discussion that resulted in the “Leuenberg Agreement.” This agreement sought to reconcile not just Lutheran and Reformed churches, but also “the Union churches that grew out of them, and the related pre-Reformation churches, the Waldensian Church and the Church of the Czech Brethren.”<sup>118</sup> The European “Preparatory Assembly for the Drafting of an Agreement between the Reformation Churches in Europe” that called for fellowship between these Churches sought input from each on what unity should look like. They found the results to be “practically unanimous in their resolve to continue to seek church fellowship,” and from these responses, the Assembly was able to formulate an agreement that facilitated fellowship between approximately seventy Churches.<sup>119</sup> Like its American predecessors, the discussion of the “Leuenberg Agreement” blames language for much of the churches’ disagreements, and it is strong in its desire to create a common Christian front in the face of contemporary societal issues.

The “Leuenberg Agreement,” however, has been criticized for glazing over confessional, traditional, and ritual differences in its quick attempt to find unity. The language used throughout

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<sup>117</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 58.

<sup>118</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 61.

<sup>119</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 62.

the document demonstrates its attempt to reconcile differences between Churches, but also lacks the theological veracity of the Lutheran-Reformed dialogues in America. Instead, the “Leuenberg Agreement” presented truths nearly any Christian denomination would affirm, without delving into the differences that define them. For example, it stated that “agreement in the right teaching of the [gospel], and in the right administration of the sacraments, is the necessary and sufficient prerequisite for the true unity of the church.”<sup>120</sup> After establishing this requirement, it diminished the claim by stating that it must be a “common understanding of the gospel insofar as this is required for establishing church fellowship between them.”<sup>121</sup> In other words, the interpretation of Scripture need not be exactly the same to be identified as an agreement on how it should be taught; the agreement must just be enough to contribute to a similar deliverance of the sacraments. The text then continued into subsequent vague definitions of agreement on preaching, baptism, and justification, announcing that the participating parties “take the decisions of the Reformation fathers seriously, but are today able to agree” on statements regarding these historical issues of debate.<sup>122</sup> The “Leuenberg Agreement” presented each divisive issue in three parts: what the Churches agree on, what divides them still, and how a resolution may be reached. This arrangement served both to respect the history and tradition that makes the Churches hesitant to reach full unity, but also to demonstrate how these issues are minor in the grander scheme of Christian fellowship. Like the American cohort’s decision in *Marburg Revisited*, the “Leuenberg Agreement” representatives found that “[t]here remain considerable differences between our churches in forms of worship, types of spirituality, and church order... [but] we cannot discern in these differences any factors which should divide the

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<sup>120</sup> *An Invitation to Action*, (1984) 65.

<sup>121</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 67.

<sup>122</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 69.

church.”<sup>123</sup> With that statement, they proceeded to declare that church fellowship has been achieved and how it will be realized. For European Lutheran and Reformed Churches, the “Leuenberg Agreement” closed the case on ecumenism.

After the European Lutheran and Reformed churches reached their relatively quick agreement on church fellowship, their American counterparts’ dialogue continued for twenty-five years before reaching a similar conclusion. The subsequent session of American Lutheran-Reformed dialogue was summarized in *An Invitation to Action: The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series III, 1981-1983*. The participating Churches included the groups that later became the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America; the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ; as well as several dissenting Churches, including the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.<sup>124</sup> The overall goal of this 1984 publication was to examine similar agreements and discussions that took place in the Western world in the 1970s and 1980s, to discuss their relevance to the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue that began with *Marburg Revisited*, and to appeal to the dominant Lutheran and Reformed bodies in America to commence the process of reconciling differences and recognizing one another as a common brotherhood of God that can fully share communion and ministry.

As in *Marburg Revisited*, *An Invitation to Action* handled major theological topics divided into sections with input from both Lutheran and Reformed scholars. The first issue requiring resolution was justification, which had been extensively covered in *Marburg Revisited*. Since agreement had essentially been reached on this subject in the first series of dialogue, *An*

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<sup>123</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 70.

<sup>124</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) xv-xvii.



*Invitation to Action* took no further steps in working to resolution. Like their predecessors, representatives of the third series of dialogue proposed that agreement on “justification by grace through faith alone” should be sufficient to unite Lutheran and Reformed congregations, disregarding any further discussion on works righteousness or predestination.<sup>125</sup> Since Series III considered justification a resolved issue, they turned their attention to two outlying areas of debate: the Lord’s Supper and ministry.

Again following the model of *Marburg Revisited*, Series III of the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue focused on the fellowship aspect of the Eucharist, rather than the divisive interpretations of Christology. The discussion opened with general agreement on “the greatness of the Supper” and “the new community” it produces.<sup>126</sup> The dialogue in these sections revealed the social justice mission of the participating liberal-leaning denominations. Collectively, the representatives positioned Holy Communion as something “God intends [for] the entire human family..., the fellowship of believers..., and oneness in Christ.”<sup>127</sup> By focusing on the unity the Eucharist brings, rather than divisive historical interpretations, the dialogue facilitated a feeling of community that invited the present representatives to consider the importance of agreement in modern times. Furthermore, the dialogue proposed a new term to override differences of interpretation: “acceptable diversities within one Christian faith.”<sup>128</sup> This term, as becomes clear throughout Series III, adopted themes from the “Leuenberg Agreement” and allowed for differences between denominations, as long as they agree on the big picture. This grander agreement provided for a path to full communion, even as interpretations of “the real presence of Church” continued to vary. As no one person can interpret the mysteries of God, including those

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<sup>125</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 9.

<sup>126</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 15.

<sup>127</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 15.

<sup>128</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 16.

regarding Holy Communion, then diversities were not divisive, but rather contributed to a more holistic understanding of God's grace. The concept of "acceptable diversities" changed the conversation of ecumenism from one seeking to erase differences to one that sought to respect and overcome them.

Following the general agreement on the Lord's Supper, *An Invitation to Action* included documents that reflected the major participating Churches' policies on the Eucharist. The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America, predecessors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, published a joint "Statement on Communion Practices" in 1978, foreshadowing their unification ten years later.<sup>129</sup> In this publication, the Churches sought to answer questions regarding the relationship between confession, absolution, and communion which "arise as a result of the gradual movement of congregations toward a more celebrative emphasis in connection with Holy Communion."<sup>130</sup> The introduction reflected on the role of the Lord's Supper as "remembrance, fellowship, thanksgiving, confession and forgiveness, and celebration,"<sup>131</sup> without reference to Martin Luther's theological rendering or Scripture itself. However, soon after, the Lutheran Churches used their historical confessional phase to refer to Christ's presence in the Eucharist—that Christ's "body and blood [are] given 'in with and under' the bread and the wine." They followed the use of this token Lutheran concept with the footnote, "It is the responsibility of our churches to teach clearly this Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper and to witness to it in dealing with other churches."<sup>132</sup> They similarly

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<sup>129</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 74.

<sup>130</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 74.

<sup>131</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 76.

<sup>132</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 76. The footnote continues, "Fulfilling the obligation to the truth in this way makes it possible to express the unity of the Church at the Lord's table with those who affirm the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament but who use formulations to describe it other than those used in the Lutheran Confessions." This note on the importance of the Lutheran confession seems contrasted by their acceptance of other "formulations," but accurately reflects the mission of unity that drives the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue.

returned to their Lutheran roots by asserting that “the unity of Word and Sacrament should be carefully maintained.”<sup>133</sup> After discussing Lutheran doctrine regarding the Eucharist, the ALC-LCA document transitioned to recommendations for practice, in which they presented a much more universally accepting interpretation.

The ALC and LCA denominations agreed that the practice of Holy Communion should be an act of fellowship that bridges denominational boundaries. They announced their position that “Holy Communion is the sacramental meal of the new people of God who are called and incorporated into the body of Christ through baptism. Whenever the sacrament is celebrated it should be *open to all such people* who are present and ready for admission.”<sup>134</sup> This statement was a clear pronouncement that interpretation of the Eucharist is not a barrier to communion fellowship. As long as a person is a baptized Christian who feels appropriately prepared to take the Lord’s Supper, the Lutherans believed he or she should be invited to share the Meal. They added the stipulations that “[p]ersonal preparation should be encouraged” and the parish should provide “[o]ppportunity for private confession and absolution,” but that none of these make a person “worthy” to receive God’s grace; instead, it is a gift freely granted, and a reminder of one’s salvation through Christ.<sup>135</sup> Further on in their statement, the ALC and LCA described five criteria for intercommunion, but like the “Leuenberg Agreement,” the language allowed for general Christian consensus without any specification on interpretation.<sup>136</sup> As for the means of distribution, “[a] precise manner should not be an issue. What is important is that practices

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<sup>133</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 82.

<sup>134</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 78. Emphasis added.

<sup>135</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 79.

<sup>136</sup> The requirements for intercommunion include “a. That the participants be baptized Christians; b. That the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament be publicly affirmed; c. That the Sacrament be celebrated as a Means of Grace; d. That the Words of Institution be proclaimed; and e. That the elements associated with our Lord’s institution be used.” *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 80.

provide the image of unity, reflecting the unity God has given.”<sup>137</sup> This statement recognized the differences in ritual administration both within the Lutheran Church and between the Lutheran and Reformed Churches, and agreed with the dialogue representatives that it should not be a church-dividing issue. Despite the outline on doctrine earlier in this statement, it appears that the predecessors of the ELCA considered the theme of “acceptable diversities” in their decision to allow people of diverse Christian backgrounds at their altar.

In 1982, towards the end of the Series III dialogue, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Reformed Church in America entered into a communion agreement similar to the ALC-LCA statement on communion practice. Like the Lutherans, these Reformed denominations agreed, “Whenever the supper is served, all communicant members of the church present are to be invited to participate.”<sup>138</sup> Although this language is unclear as to whether it only indicates members of the Reformed Church or the broader body of Christ, the subsequent discussion alluded to an open communion table. Also like the Lutheran Churches, they began with a discussion of the tenets proclaimed in their confessions and the Heidelberg Catechism, and then acknowledged the many meanings of the Lord’s Supper. The Reformed statement acknowledged the importance of the Word in the practice of communion, as well as the unworthiness of each person to receive this graceful gift from God. They decided that the invitation specifically pertained to “all those who are active church members or communicants in good standing in some Christian church,”<sup>139</sup> therefore making further discussion on communion a moot point. By

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<sup>137</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 83.

<sup>138</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 84. Later on, they stated “that the church includes all the faithful everywhere, both in heaven and on earth, and not simply those visibly assembled.” This broad expansion incorporated into the community both the living of other denominations as well as those who have passed on.

<sup>139</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 87.

the mid-1980s, before the Series III dialogue was complete, the PCUSA, RCA, and ELCA predecessors therefore agreed that communion should be shared between all Christians.

The second major topic *An Invitation to Action* tackles is Church ministry. A full communion agreement allows for both altar and pulpit fellowship, and therefore the participating Churches must agree on the duties of ministry for the trained and ordained hierarchy as well as the volunteer layperson. The “Joint Statement on Ministry” that summarized the discussion in Series III states, “There is but *one ministry, that of Jesus Christ*. In all its aspects this was a *servant* ministry.”<sup>140</sup> All further discussion surrounded the idea that not only called and ordained ministers should be servants to their congregations, but all members of the related Churches should be servants to one another and humanity more generally. The Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the twentieth century sought to place greater importance on the mission of the laity, which had been under-emphasized in historical perceptions of Church hierarchy. As described in the previous section on Church structure, Presbyterian and Lutheran Churches are organized differently. The discussion in *An Invitation to Action* sought to analyze these differences, explain them to the representatives of each denomination, and conclude that differences in Church order do not prevent unity.

The “Joint Statement” focused on the aspects of ministry that the Lutheran and Reformed Churches had in common. While both emphasized the universal servant component that applied to all members, it is important to note that “[b]oth traditions assert that men and women alike are eligible for this office but also must be called, examined for fitness, educated theologically, and approved by the appropriate judiciary.”<sup>141</sup> Although the Presbyterians recognized more levels of Church office than the Lutherans, they required the same process for ordained ministers to be

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<sup>140</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 24.

<sup>141</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 29.

able to sufficiently represent the Word of God. Also, these more liberal denominations opened the ministry to all who feel called to it, regardless of gender, which was—and still is—an important distinction from their conservative counterparts who did not sign “A Formula of Agreement.” Furthermore, despite perceived differences, the “Joint Statement” asserted that both polities were constitutional, and therefore easily reconciled. On these premises, they determined that “there are no substantive matters concerning ministry which should divide” the congregations any longer.<sup>142</sup> This conclusion was supported by documents from each denomination which endeavored to explain the reasoning behind their Church’s ministerial order.

The penultimate section of *An Invitation to Action* summarized Lutheran and Reformed perspectives on ministry. “Office and Ordination in the Reformed Tradition” explained the division of ministry in the Reformed tradition, especially the Presbyterian form of governance, and its theological foundation to Lutheran participants in Series III of the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue. Although this document presented the roles of the pastoral office, elders, deacons, and the general baptized people as historical and as based in theology, it acknowledged a common mission of a “call to service” and a willingness to compromise as unity progressed.<sup>143</sup> The Reformed denominations recognized that “the authority of office derives from Jesus Christ,” and “Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners,”<sup>144</sup> thus presenting positions with which the Lutherans could agree, despite different forms of government. Their self-representation minimized the distinction between the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon, demonstrating them less as separate levels of government and more as groups which have taken over various roles for

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<sup>142</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 31.

<sup>143</sup> The Reformed churches represented in *An Invitation to Action* acknowledged, “New light from Scripture may well demand changes in the theology and practice of the church,” and they hoped to comply with the “principle of continuing reformation.” *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 91.

<sup>144</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 93.

simpler management of the duties of the Church. The document concluded by recognizing that any candidate for office “must be called, gifted, and when necessary trained,” and delineated the specific process by which individuals who fit this description may gain official roles in the Church.<sup>145</sup> Overall, “Office and Ordination in the Reformed Tradition” conformed to its intention of explaining the Reformed Church order in a way that broke down any perceived barriers it may have created for Lutheran-Reformed fellowship. It drew the focus back to the core message that everyone who serves the Church in any capacity, ordained or not, represents the message of God through their service regardless of title.

For the Lutheran Churches participating in the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, ecclesiastical hierarchy lacked the titles of Reformed orders, but leaders and laypeople in the church served the same causes as their Reformed counterparts. Warren Quanbeck, one of the key Lutheran voices in *Marburg Revisited*, shared his expertise again in *An Invitation to Action* with his reflection, “Church and Ministry.” As in *Marburg Revisited*, he considered the influence of “historical studies in the Scriptures and in the development of theology” on the establishment of Church governments in the modern ecumenical era.<sup>146</sup> Like the Reformed, the Lutherans acknowledged that each baptized person who considers him- or herself a member of the body of Christ was serving a holy mission to represent God’s Word. Throughout his text, Quanbeck spoke of this role as one facing the whole Christian community, not just Lutherans, underscoring the already-present unity that this series of the dialogue sought to further develop. It was evident that the Lutherans shared in the Reformed vision of renewing the servant image all people should assume. They recognized a similar training and ordination process for rostered ministers that involved “the imposition of hands and prayer for the guidance and power of the Spirit upon the

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<sup>145</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 98-99.

<sup>146</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 101.

person so set aside,” a person who is professional, relatable, loving, and educated.<sup>147</sup>

Collectively, these two reflections on ministry from the Reformed and Lutheran perspectives represented a common attempt to redefine ministry as service and to recognize the call extended to all people, making ministry a point on which the dialogue may hinge its path to unity regardless of the acceptable diversities in official forms of Church government.

*An Invitation to Action* concludes with statements from the Lutheran and Reformed representatives to their respective governing bodies. Both documents demonstrated the representatives’ belief that they succeeded in their goal “to manifest the unity of the church of Jesus Christ.”<sup>148</sup> They also represented the newfound position that the Churches need not agree on every aspect of theology in order to enter into full fellowship with one another, but may maintain and respect the remaining “acceptable diversities” that persist.<sup>149</sup> The two denominations recognized that they may not fully resolve their historical differences, including their positions on the mode of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, but they argued that these diversities serve as areas from which each denomination can learn from the others and more fully appreciate the mysteries of God’s Word. The Lutheran participants in Series III of the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue concluded, “For our part we see no theological or contextual reasons that now would be impediments to [E]ucharistic and pulpit hospitality and common mission.”<sup>150</sup> The Reformed faction recommended some internal actions that ought to be taken, like revising their books of order to include the Augsburg Confession, but they ultimately agreed that “our churches will find new joy in their unity in our common Lord, Jesus Christ.”<sup>151</sup> Unity was no

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<sup>147</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 106.

<sup>148</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 108.

<sup>149</sup> “A Statement of Lutherans to Lutherans Reflecting on this Dialogue” specifically noted, “We do not believe it to be possible or desirable that all Christian communions should become identical. *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 108-109.

<sup>150</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 117.

<sup>151</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 126.



longer a distant goal, but one becoming tangible to both Lutheran and Reformed participating parties.

Following *An Invitation to Action*, all the major issues dividing the Lutheran and Reformed churches had been essentially resolved, but one more dialogue occurred. In keeping with the hope from *An Invitation to Action* that “any further official conversations be scheduled in [the] new context of the reconciling process,”<sup>152</sup> the final step on the path to “A Formula of Agreement” took place in *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North American Today*. The primary purpose of this final series of conversations was to resolve issues that arose when the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America formed in 1988, and one of its component Churches, the Lutheran Church in America, requested an additional series of dialogue “to elaborate the conclusions reached in *An Invitation to Action* and to answer questions that have arisen about it, e.g., the relation between dialogue reports and the governing and liturgical documents of the churches.”<sup>153</sup> As with its predecessors, this round of dialogue sought to identify the steps that must be taken to assure full fellowship between the participating Church bodies, which had been narrowed down to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Although the shortest publication on Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, at half the length of *An Invitation to Action*, *A Common Calling* served to conclude four decades of discussion and make firm recommendations for full communion that resulted in “A Formula of Agreement” less than five years later.

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<sup>152</sup> *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 117.

<sup>153</sup> *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today*, ed. Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993) 11.

After introducing the previous four decades of dialogue and their conclusions, *A Common Calling* sets forth its tasks for this round of discussion. While recognizing that “fundamental theological differences from the sixteenth century are still relevant and keenly felt,” and there is an “uneasiness about the theological basis for intercommunion and exchange of ministers,”<sup>154</sup> this dialogue hoped to reach conclusions that respected this diversity while allowing for full ecumenical partnership between the participating congregations. The text then delved into a discussion of confessional traditions that mirrors the one begun in *Marburg Revisited*. After identifying the plethora of differences between the actual text of the various confessions as well as the importance the various Churches placed on them, *A Common Calling* concluded that both Lutheran and Reformed traditions “acknowledge the primary authority of the triune God, revealed in the Scriptures and present in the living Christ active in the church.”<sup>155</sup> The authors asserted that this value on Scripture and Christ trumped the confessional diversities between the traditions. These theological and ecclesial diversities rather served to give a complementary and more complete vision of the role of God’s relationship with the world.

In its mission to embrace theological diversity, *A Common Calling* drew upon historical attempts at agreement. Although it acknowledged the relative failure of Marburg (1529) and Montbéliard (1586), the fourth series of dialogue recalled the *satis est* (“it is enough”) concept of the Augsburg Confession. This statement set the precedent that the final series of dialogue reawakened, claiming, “For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree [*satis est consentire*] concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike

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<sup>154</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 21.

<sup>155</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 30.

everywhere.”<sup>156</sup> Although this reasoning was absent from previous sessions of dialogue, *A Common Calling* used the *satis est* clause to support its assertion that full theological agreement was not the goal, but “mutual acceptance and admonition” was instead.<sup>157</sup> After establishing this idea and its historical support, the subsequent theological discussion of *A Common Calling* seemed to be a moot point. Differences in Christology, the Eucharist, and predestination were identified, although not any differently from the previous series of dialogues,<sup>158</sup> and the ultimate sense throughout the discussion is that these differences can, and should, easily coexist. The theological disagreements and historical condemnations between Lutheran and Reformed traditions were minimized in favor of the overarching message that these issues should no longer be church-dividing in the modern age.

Despite the support of the Augsburg Confession for “acceptable diversities” between traditions, it is undeniable that cultural context heavily influenced the minimization of theological differences in this section of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue. Expanding on the perception of the changing world that *Marburg Revisited* introduced, *A Common Calling* acknowledged, “We are living in an era that witnesses a decline of membership in the mainline Protestant denominations.”<sup>159</sup> They claimed that this decline has created more ties between Churches, as well as within them, despite diversity in theological tradition. Instead of being

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<sup>156</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 33.

<sup>157</sup> Throughout *A Common Calling*, the editors use the term “mutual acceptance and admonition,” which recalls the discussion of “acceptable diversities” in *An Invitation to Action*. The frequent use of these terms reflects a willingness to understand the other tradition’s beliefs and use them to expand one’s own, proclaiming them as different interpretations of the same concept that serve to strengthen comprehension of the subject. Another phrasing this series prefers is, “Honest differences of interpretation, even of an interpretive framework, must be allowed.” *A Common Calling* (1993) 39.

<sup>158</sup> Although the discussion of these theological subjects is not notably different than the discussion in the previous series of dialogues, the formatting is certainly interesting. It presents the respective positions in a parallel fashion and highlights the reason each side has been hesitant to accept the other. E.g. “Lutheran theologians traditionally insisted on the notion of the Lord’s corporeal presence in the Supper through the Word.... What they feared was the dissolution of the presence into a merely internal reality..., and thus the reduction of the sacrament to a mere memorial.” *A Common Calling* (1993) 45.

<sup>159</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 31.

divided along denominational boundaries, Churches in the modern era are divided “along a conservative-liberal fissure.”<sup>160</sup> This observation explains the desire for fellowship between the PCUSA, RCA, UCC, and ELCA, all of which are considered liberal branches of their traditions given their orientation towards social justice issues.<sup>161</sup> The dialogue recognized that it must respond to “modern secularism and cultural pluralism,”<sup>162</sup> and it viewed full communion partnership as the solution to the situation of the Churches in America. Although the dialogue became self-aware on this point, it hesitated to make the connection between its situation and its lack of emphasis on theological differences. In the sixteenth century, survival of each Protestant movement was based on defining itself against the Roman Catholic Church and against other Protestant movements, and on aligning itself with a powerful political leader due to the rising concept of nationalism. Today, nationalism, politics, and secularism challenge the survival of Protestant denominations, and their best strategy is to band together. *A Common Calling* recognized this in the most abstract of ways, but its actions in calling for “mutual acceptance and admonition” in the face of irreconcilable differences prove the idea that the Bible and denominational interpretation of it is no longer what divides churches, but what unites them.

Given the orientation of *A Common Calling* towards acceptance of diversities and a common mission for the church, it is unsurprising that its conclusion called for active steps toward full communion. The authors acknowledged that there were more subjects to be discussion in future dialogues, including “the topics of creation, the Trinity, the role of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, ecclesiology, church, and world.”<sup>163</sup> Although these topics provided

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<sup>160</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 31.

<sup>161</sup> The churches’ liberal orientation towards issues of social justice, including feminism, war, and poverty, is reflected in *A Common Calling* (1993) 31 and 59.

<sup>162</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 58.

<sup>163</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 58.

further field for dissent and were lacking in the series of twentieth-century Lutheran-Reformed discussions, the participants in *A Common Calling* seemed to agree that they were not issues that may divide the church. As with *An Invitation to Action*, *A Common Calling* concluded that, despite different modes of thinking and theological identities, there were “no ‘church-dividing differences’ that should preclude the declaration of full fellowship between these churches.”<sup>164</sup> Following the publication of this text, the authors hoped that the participating churches would recognize one another without any negative remnants of history, and establish a means for “sharing of the Lord’s Supper” and “the orderly exchange of ordained ministers.”<sup>165</sup> The brevity of *A Common Calling* reflects its role as a final formal examination of theological differences to satisfy any remaining hesitations among the participating congregations. Its conclusion that these differences can not only coexist but also strengthen the church when viewed together leaves only one task remaining: an official declaration of ecumenical partnership, which the churches devised in 1997 under the name “A Formula of Agreement.”

Throughout each series of dialogue, participants from the four “Formula of Agreement” Churches found fewer and fewer differences in their theologies. While Scripture had historically divided them, they now altered their emphasis on the verses that divided them to the core message of the Bible that promoted their common mission of serving the Lord and spreading God’s Word. By the end of the final series of dialogue, the groundwork was laid for a full communion partnership. Chapter Three discusses the text of “A Formula of Agreement” and its follow-up “The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament,” as well as the unfavorable response by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, which continued to emphasize scriptural differences.

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<sup>164</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 65.

<sup>165</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 67.

### Chapter Three

#### Contested Fellowship: “A Formula of Agreement” and Its Detractors

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.” Eph. 2:14

Following 45 years of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue in America, the four primary denominations participating in the discussion concluded that their differences no longer remained as a barrier preventing a full ecumenical relationship between them. In 1997, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ each approved “A Formula of Agreement.” This document, and its 2000 extension “A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament,” provided guidelines for the transfer of ministers and sharing of the Lord’s Supper between the four Churches. These texts reveal the continued emphasis on common mission between the denominations, as well as their changing interpretation of Scripture to suit this mission rather than to perpetuate historical differences. However, not all Lutheran and Reformed denominations in America agreed, and the voiced dissent from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod decried a devaluation of theology that it believed “A Formula of Agreement” reflected.

The official text of the 1997 “A Formula of Agreement” forgoes any theological discussion or extensive treatment of the basis for the agreement within its text. Instead, it relies on the previous conclusions of the dialogues published in *Marburg Revisited*, *An Invitation to Action*, and *A Common Calling*. It adapts the language from *A Common Calling* to define what is meant by “full communion,” which means the participating churches must:

recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God;  
 withdraw any historic condemnation by one side or the other as inappropriate for the life and faith of our churches today;  
 continue to recognize each other's Baptism and authorize and encourage the sharing of the Lord's Supper among their members;  
 recognize each others' *[sic]* various ministries and make provision for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament;  
 establish appropriate channels of consultation and decision-making within the existing structures of the churches;  
 commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue in order to clarify further the common understanding of the faith and foster its common expression in evangelism, witness, and service;  
 [and] pledge themselves to living together under the Gospel in such a way that the principle of mutual affirmation and admonition becomes the basis of a trusting relationship in which respect and love for the other will have a chance to grow.<sup>166</sup>

Following this definition, "A Formula of Agreement" delves into a brief discussion of a few caveats and how the participating Churches will realize full communion. It acknowledges that "A Formula of Agreement" must be approved by the major governing bodies of the four Churches; this step was completed by 1998. The document further emphasizes what it considers to be key points for preserving the newfound relationship between the Churches. Like *A Common Calling*, it discusses the value of "mutual affirmation and admonition," which allows each denomination to grow as it recognizes the value of the different opinions of its fellow Churches.<sup>167</sup> Stressing mutual respect, rather than the different theological interpretations, the signatories of the "Formula of Agreement" concur that the issues become no longer church-dividing. The emphasis of the Churches then shifts from a concern about compromising their "traditional confessional and ecclesiological character" to a recognition of their "inherent unity in Christ."<sup>168</sup> Following the theme outlined in *A Common Calling*, "A Formula of Agreement" finds its authority in the *satis est* clause of the Augsburg Confession, allowing acceptable

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<sup>166</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America, and United Church of Christ, "A Formula of Agreement" (1997) 1-2.

<sup>167</sup> "A Formula of Agreement" (1997) 2.

<sup>168</sup> "A Formula of Agreement" (1997) 3.

diversities on issues relating to justification, ministry, and the Eucharist. To this end, it recalls *An Invitation to Action* in its emphasis on “the responsibility of all the baptized to participate in Christ’s servant ministry,” therefore prioritizing the Christian community above denominational differences, especially in the “changed world in which the church lives today.”<sup>169</sup> It views the challenge of Christianity to be no longer between its different varieties, but against the modern world.

Breaking with the previous dialogue, “A Formula of Agreement” embraces the “Leuenberg Agreement” as an example for ecumenism in the modern era. It quotes the European resolution on full communion extensively, upholding it as a model by which various denominations have resolved interpretational issues surrounding the Eucharist. Despite remaining differences surrounding Christology, predestination, and the physical practice of the sacraments, “A Formula of Agreement” follows the model of full communion in Europe by asserting, “the Reformation heritage in the matter of the Lord’s Supper draws from the same roots and envisages the same goal: to call the people of God to the table at which Christ himself is present to give himself for us under the word of forgiveness, empowerment, and promise.”<sup>170</sup> This transition from disagreement with the decisions of Leuenberg to acceptance of its methods represents the changing American culture for the Churches involved. These changes, which will be discussed in the next chapter, were similar to the ones in Europe prior to the 1970s.

“A Formula of Agreement” concludes by stating the steps that must be taken for acceptance among the various congregations. It acknowledges that full communion partnership requires “a strong mutual commitment” involving “serious intention, awareness, and

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<sup>169</sup> “A Formula of Agreement” (1997) 4-5.

<sup>170</sup> “A Formula of Agreement” (1997) 6.



dedication.”<sup>171</sup> It also recognizes that ecumenism will require the Churches to “challenge their self-understandings, their ways of living and acting, their structures, and even their general ecclesial ethos.”<sup>172</sup> This statement reveals that, although the participating Churches have stated that they agree on major theological issues, this partnership will face difficulties. The concluding statement of the 1997 text quotes 1 Thessalonians,<sup>173</sup> demonstrating that although Scripture had previously divided Lutheran and Reformed churches, it now serves as a force of unity.

After each denomination’s governing body had approved the “Formula of Agreement” and the full communion partnership became a reality, several practical issues remained to be resolved. In 2000, the four Churches designed a follow-up document, “A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament,” which sought to codify the rules for allowing ministers of one denomination to accept a call in another, or to transfer their membership between Churches.<sup>174</sup> The goal of these guidelines was to preserve the integrity of both the individual Churches and their ecumenical relationship, while simultaneously allowing congregations “to draw on the available ministers of the other participating churches to meet mission needs.”<sup>175</sup> The document begins with a general introduction of why it was written as an addition to the original “Formula of Agreement,” followed by input from each participating Church outlining its rules for the exchange of ministers. The greatest emphasis throughout this work is on the necessity of respecting each Church’s polity and right to select its pastors according to its traditional call process.

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<sup>171</sup> “A Formula of Agreement” (1997) 7-8.

<sup>172</sup> “A Formula of Agreement” (1997) 8.

<sup>173</sup> The specific verse quoted is 1 Thessalonians 5:24, from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible: “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”

<sup>174</sup> The document was subsequently revised in a second edition, published in February 2004. All references here will be made to this second edition.

<sup>175</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Reformed Church in America, and United Church of Christ, “A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament” (2004) 2.

Although each Church's input reflects its own ecclesiastical structure and historical tradition, the rules each denomination delineates are remarkably similar. They all agree that a pastor must "first be formed and educated for ministry in one's own tradition, and have experience in serving in that church's ordained ministry. Such experience and grounding in one's own tradition are seen to be essential prior to serving in a setting of another tradition..."<sup>176</sup> This statement stands out as a subtle representation of continuing differences between the Churches. If the Churches believed in the conclusions of the series of dialogue prior to the signing of "A Formula of Agreement," which outlined the lack of remaining church-dividing issues, why would they believe that the traditions are so different as to preclude a minister of one Church from serving his or her first call in another ecumenical partnership Church? The document does not provide an explanation for why the experience in one's own tradition is "essential," nor does it seem to consider the claim strange. Furthermore, both the introductory "Principles of Agreement" and each Church's guidelines require a level of "knowledge of and an appreciation for the history, polity, theological and liturgical identity, practices of ministry, and discipline" of the Church in which the minister intends to serve, whether it is his or her home Church or not.<sup>177</sup> This guideline adheres to *A Common Calling*'s claim, "Our goal is not to homogenize, but to recognize."<sup>178</sup> By requiring ministers ordained in one Church to have working knowledge of the practical details of a different Church if they hope to serve there, "A Formula of Agreement" ensures the preservation of each Church's polity, hierarchy, and theology. However, this requirement reiterates the point that perhaps these Churches are not in quite as much agreement as they suppose.

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<sup>176</sup> "A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament" (2004) 3.

<sup>177</sup> "A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament" (2004) 3.

<sup>178</sup> *A Common Calling* (1993) 8.

Despite these curious stipulations, the remainder of “The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers” is straightforward. Each Church details its call process, where the minister’s pension and benefits come from, and the guidelines for a minister of one Church’s participation in the governance of another Church which he or she is serving. It asserts that the Churches should maintain an open dialogue between them, especially regarding the fitness of each minister, any disciplinary action taken, and the results of the required annual review. Each Church also presents the process for transference of ministry, should a pastor serving in a Church not of his or her tradition wish to switch their ordination credentials to that Church instead of the one in which he or she was ordained. These provisions are stringent, and they explicitly discourage this event.<sup>179</sup> It is possible that, if one Church had more open positions or better benefits, pastors may wish to transfer their ministerial credentials; therefore, the provisions for this transference may have been established to preserve each Church and prevent the situation in which one with fewer resources experiences a significant decline in its number of pastors. On a more theological level, these stipulations may be in place to preserve the traditions of each Church, despite the common acknowledgement that their differences are not as great as they appear.

Although it reads as a largely legal document, meant solely to outline policies and procedures for the exchange of ministers, “A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament” raises debatable contentions about the smooth transition to ecumenical partnership. Several tenets of the document, as outlined above, appear to be attempts to preserve one Church’s history when faced with opposition or influence from

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<sup>179</sup> “[T]he goal of the *FOA* was not to encourage ordained ministers to transfer membership from one denomination to another. The *FOA* seeks to allow a more effective use and deployment of the ordained leaders of each denomination on an *occasional* or *temporary* basis in order to enhance our shared ministry and mission.” From the Reformed Church in America’s ministry exchange policies, “A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament” (2004) 20.

another Church. The defensive tone may be solely because the document is a procedural piece, but it also may reflect enduring discontinuity between the denominations. Unlike in the published series of dialogues preceding “A Formula of Agreement,” this sequel lacks detail about the intentions of the authors, so whether it is merely a legal document or an attempt to preserve tradition is left to the interpretation of the reader.

The most ecumenical language arises in the texts of the United Church of Christ. Their history of diversity and origins within multiple traditions color the tone of their section of provisions. Not only is theirs the shortest section, but it is also the only to utilize emotional rather than legal language. They recognize, “Some persons will be [led] by personal faith and vocational pilgrimage to transfer their ministerial credentials permanently to another formula communion.”<sup>180</sup> This more favorable language regarding transference of membership precedes guidelines that are more simple than in other Churches. Similarly, the “Search and Call Process” section describes a more faith-based call process.<sup>181</sup> In contrast, the other Churches only mention faith in the requirements for the evaluation of the fitness of a minister, and God is wholly absent from the documents. While this again may simply reflect the legislative nature of the document, it does leave the Churches open for dissent on theological grounds from Churches who did not sign “A Formula of Agreement.”

The most vocal dissenter to “A Formula Agreement” was the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, a conservative denomination among the Lutheran Churches in America. Like the other branches of Lutheranism that made their way into American religiosity, the theology of

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<sup>180</sup> “A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament” (2004) 27.

<sup>181</sup> The first step of the call process for the United Church of Christ states, “The heart of the Search and Call process in the United Church of Christ is discernment – discernment of local church search committees as to who God is leading them to consider – and discernment of candidates as to where God would see their skills/gifts to be most appreciated.” “A Formula of Agreement: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament” (2004) 30.

the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) was brought by Saxon immigrants in the early nineteenth century. In 1847, these immigrants formed the Missouri Synod, and it “continued into the twentieth century as a bastion of ultraconservative theology and partial cultural separatism (as manifested particularly in its comprehensive school system).”<sup>182</sup> In the late 1980s, at the time of the ELCA merger, the LCMS boasted more than 2.6 million members.<sup>183</sup> As of 2016, membership has declined similarly to the other mainstream Protestant denominations mentioned in the first chapter. Although the Church counts slightly above two million baptized members, active communicants and confirmed membership hovers around 1.5 million.<sup>184</sup> This change reflects the common struggle in American churches to recruit younger membership, as congregations’ numbers decline with the increasing age of members. Although other conservative Lutheran and Reformed denominations in America expressed their dissent by refusing to participate in discussion or sign “A Formula of Agreement,” representatives from the LCMS participated in the mid-twentieth-century Lutheran-Reformed dialogues. However, they abstained from voting at the end of the third series, published in *An Invitation to Action*, and in 1999, shortly after the signing of “A Formula of Agreement,” the LCMS issued their response. Their document, “The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective,” highlights what they view as the lacking theological components of the Lutheran-Reformed agreement, and it was disseminated for study among LCMS seminaries, clergy, and laypeople.

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod’s “The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective” examines the Lutheran-Reformed agreement through the lens of historical

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<sup>182</sup> Williams (2002) 210.

<sup>183</sup> Williams (2002) 361.

<sup>184</sup> Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, “LCMS statistics for 2016: membership down, contributions up,” *LCMS Blog*, <https://blogs.lcms.org/2017/lcms-statistics-for-2016-membership-down-contributions-up>, published 2 November 2017, accessed 29 March 2018.

Lutheran confessions. Most of its claims rest on the *Book of Concord*, which was “compiled in 1580 by Luther’s followers to provide a standard of reference for ascertaining correctness of belief” and continues to represent traditional Lutheran belief, considered orthodox by the more conservative branches of modern Lutheranism, including the LCMS.<sup>185</sup> Their response to “A Formula of Agreement” primarily concerns the issue of the Lord’s Supper, and it concludes that the ELCA, in entering this agreement, can no longer be considered a Lutheran Church. Instead, it has succumbed to the influence of the Reformed Church, which the LCMS believes has been trying to infiltrate Lutheran communion for centuries. Although it reaches an overly dramatic conclusion, the LCMS document contains valuable analysis of the dialogue leading up to and the ratified text of “A Formula of Agreement.”

To begin its analysis, the LCMS summarizes “A Formula of Agreement” through its conservative confessional perspective and includes study questions to make its point of view explicit. Strictly tied to the confessions that have historically defined the Lutheran Church, the LCMS argues that “A Formula of Agreement” “says that the historic confessions are no longer binding... [and therefore it] is not compatible with the binding nature of confessional subscription in historic Lutheran tradition.”<sup>186</sup> Their primary examples are the language concerning the Lord’s Supper and Christology in “A Formula of Agreement.” The summary argues that the “doctrine and practices... truly are contradictory, not ‘complementary’ as FOA [Formula of Agreement] claims.”<sup>187</sup> The summary concludes that the “FOA simply glides over historic differences.”<sup>188</sup> The summary, although brief, demonstrates the LCMS’s tone towards

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<sup>185</sup> Williams (2002) 84.

<sup>186</sup> Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective” (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1999) 7.

<sup>187</sup> “The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective” (1999) 8.

<sup>188</sup> “The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective” (1999) 9.

“A Formula of Agreement.” To this conservative denomination of Lutherans, “A Formula of Agreement” not only betrays Lutheran history, but dilutes tradition, dialogue, and practice to the extent where the Lutherans that signed it are beyond recognition to their peers.

The summary and study questions are merely the preludes to the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod’s true chastisement of “A Formula of Agreement,” which comes in the form of “A Theological Assessment” from the Department of Systematic Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The seminary, established in 1846 and affiliated with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, posits as its “central purpose... to prepare men for the pastoral ministry, as well as men and women for other service in the church, through programs offering an understanding of the Christian faith that is Christ centered, biblically based, confessionally Lutheran, and evangelically active.”<sup>189</sup> It is a prime example of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod’s comprehensive school system that perpetuates its conservative ideology and traditionalist biblical interpretation. The seminary’s mission statement’s inclusion of only men for ministry demonstrates its conservative position in contrast to the open ministry among “Formula of Agreement” Churches. Similarly, its emphasis on confession recalls Reformed accusations in *An Invitation to Action* that the Lutheran Church positions its confession above even Scripture, and it explains the value the theological assessment places specifically on Lutheran confessions.

“A Formula of Agreement: A Theological Assessment” begins by denouncing the ELCA for its lack of confessional adherence even prior to “A Formula of Agreement.” The authors claim that their constitution’s inclusion of just one paragraph on confession, which only holds the Augsburg Confession as one of any great value, abandons too much of Lutheran history.

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<sup>189</sup> “Who We Are,” Concordia Theological Seminary – Fort Wayne website, <http://www.ctsfw.edu/about/who-we-are/>, copyright 2018, accessed 30 March 2018.

Furthermore, they accuse the ELCA of betraying Scripture as well, stating, “Given the ELCA’s deliberate exclusion of biblical infallibility/inerrancy from its constitution, all further commitments rest on a slippery slope of relativism.”<sup>190</sup> Since the ELCA is a liberal, modern Church, its lack of belief in biblical infallibility is typical, so this statement reveals more about the LCMS than the ELCA. As is evident in its subsequent arguments, the LCMS holds the Bible in its original form as the Word of God, to be taken literally at every verse in both the realms of Law and Gospel. Similarly, they rely heavily on the Lutheran confessions developed in the sixteenth century under scriptural advisement. Taken together, the LCMS reliance on literal Scripture and historic confessions contribute to its status as a bulwark in the face of cultural change, which is evident throughout the Church’s argument against ecumenical dialogue exemplified in “A Formula of Agreement.”

The dialogue preceding “A Formula of Agreement” and the document itself promote the ideas of “acceptable diversities” and “mutual recognition and admonition.” To the LCMS, the invention of this category betrays five centuries of Church doctrine and creates a false basis for unity. In regards to the Lord’s Supper, the LCMS’s “Theological Assessment” says the Lutheran Church cannot recognize Reformed distribution of the sacrament, because entering into agreement with “pastors and congregations who explicitly deny or deliberately avoid saying that the bread of the Sacrament is the body of Christ and the cup is the blood of Christ...puts the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper into the category of adiaphora, matters on which there may be disagreement without disrupting the unity of the faith and the church.”<sup>191</sup> The LCMS posits the interpretation of Christ’s presence in the sacrament as “in, with, and under” the bread and wine as the core of the Lutheran interpretation of the confession, with which the ELCA would likely

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<sup>190</sup> “The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective” (1999) 16.

<sup>191</sup> “The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective” (1999) 17.



agree. However, since the Reformed Church views Christ's human body as solely in heaven and therefore not physically present in the bread and wine, the LCMS believes they do not preach the truth. Therefore, the ELCA abandoned its Lutheran roots when it entered into full communion with the Reformed Church. The LCMS views "[c]oncession [to be] totally on the Lutheran side," and argues that pastors who serve under this new union must now be "act[ing] contrary to their ordination vows."<sup>192</sup> Delving into the difference of Lutheran and Reformed perspectives on Christology, the taking of the sacrament by the unfaithful, and the practice of sharing communion, the LCMS furthers its argument that "Lutherans and Reformed have a different understanding of what it means that Christ is the host of the Lord's Supper;" any agreement that these differences may be overcome "is a totally false assumption."<sup>193</sup> By ascribing to history and refusing to compromise, the LCMS attempts to position itself as the true Lutheran Church, and its counterpart, the ELCA, as one in which confession no longer has meaning, and therefore the word "Lutheran" no longer applies.

Although the Lord's Supper is the crux of the LCMS argument against "A Formula of Agreement, they acknowledge several other issues that may arise in the search for full communion. First, since "[t]he Reformed neither believe nor practice emergency Baptism for infants and presumably also for adults," they present a potential situation in which a parent who is a member of a Lutheran congregation being served by a Reformed minister may be stuck with a dead, unbaptized child because the Reformed pastor was not "overly concerned."<sup>194</sup> This situation is merely fear-mongering, and is made moot by "The Orderly Exchange of Ministers" in 2000, which explicitly mentions that a pastor serving in a tradition other than his or her own

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<sup>192</sup> "The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective" (1999) 19.

<sup>193</sup> "The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective" (1999) 21.

<sup>194</sup> "The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective" (1999) 24.

must ascribe to that tradition's beliefs and practices. The LCMS also raises several other issues of ministry that were subsequently resolved, including the practice of ordination. They claim that ordaining women may be a "problem for fellowship between churches," but again, since the four signatory Churches of "A Formula of Agreement" all allowed ordination of women prior to the Agreement, it is not an issue. Finally, the LCMS asserts that "[a]ny differences on justification are simply put to the side."<sup>195</sup> Although the dialogues handle topics relating to justification, the LCMS's assertion aptly claims that these issues were resolved without any true agreement, which the LCMS believes betrays Lutheran tradition. With a final attack on secularism and postmodernism,<sup>196</sup> the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's argument against "A Formula of Agreement" is complete.

In defending the Lutheran confession, and arguing that the ELCA has abandoned it by signing "A Formula of Agreement," the LCMS contends that the Reformed Church has taken advantage of the Lutheran Church. They claim that "the Agreement brings to a climax Reformed attempts, reaching back as far as Zwingli's meeting with Luther at Marburg in October 1529, to let Reformed communicants participate in the Sacrament at Lutheran altars."<sup>197</sup> This argument presents the Reformed Church as aggressors, and the Lutheran Church as surrendering the true faith. This tone continues throughout the "Theological Assessment." The hostile position against the Reformed Church is in keeping with the LCMS's defense of their tradition against change, but it is a false conclusion of the reasoning for "A Formula of Agreement." Rather than the Reformed group taking advantage of the Lutherans and dissolving the confessional tradition of

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<sup>195</sup> "The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective" (1999) 24.

<sup>196</sup> They write, "the various churches enter into full communion with one another while keeping their former confessions—minus the condemnations. Did theologians invent "postmodernism" before it became a secular fashion?" "The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective" (1999) 25.

<sup>197</sup> "The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective" (1999) 14. On the same page, they further state that international agreements in line with "A Formula of Agreement" have "advanced Reformed inroads into Lutheran churches."

the latter in favor of a diluted Lutheranism, it is a more accurate assessment to conclude that both the Reformed and the Lutheran Churches that signed “A Formula of Agreement” may have subconsciously minimized their historical differences in an attempt created a more unified Christianity in the face of a world in which mainstream Protestants no longer represent the majority. The following chapter, focusing on Charles Taylor’s concept of secularism and Victor Turner’s idea of *communitas*, combines these theories into a model than convincingly explains how the modern, secular age has enabled ecumenical agreements that historical divisions had made impossible.

## Chapter Four

### Protestants in the World: Secularization, *Communitas*, and Ecumenism

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Gal. 3:26-28

In the twenty-first century, religious and nonreligious people alike point to falling numbers in polls of people who ascribe to traditional religions as proof that the modern era is more secular than its predecessors, and that religion will soon become nonexistent. As such, “children of faith” have bonded together in the face of this changing age. In his widely-discussed work, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor tackles the thesis, known as the “secularization hypothesis,” that religion will soon disappear, providing explanations for the apparent decline of religiosity since the Middle Ages. In this work, Taylor moderates between the competing influences of his Catholic background and scholarly study to provide a greater understanding of why secularism has become the prevailing description of the twentieth-century world. Rather than confirming the theory that science and technology will increasingly prevail over religion, Taylor provides evidence that there are various interpretations of “secular,” and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are “secular” in a way that provides non-belief as an option, but will not result in the inevitable end of religion. Applying Taylor’s theory to the modern ecumenical movement allows for a different and more accurate interpretation of why this movement has become so pervasive in the past half-century, as religious traditions seek partners who agree with their basic premise that God exists in the face of a society in which only a minority of the population may soon hold this opinion.

Charles Taylor's work bridges the realms of sociology, history, and epistemology, but his most recent detailed research examines the changes that have taken place in Western religion over the past five centuries. *A Secular Age* draws from political revolutions, religious reformations, and Western philosophy to analyze the societal changes that have enabled a shift in the way modern people interpret religion and incorporate it, or fail to incorporate it, into their lives. Taylor begins his tome by asserting that there are three primary ways in which the word "secular" may be used. The first is as a synonym to profane, in contrast to sacred, which was primarily used in the ancient world to define time and space in separate spheres.<sup>198</sup> Rather than standing on its own, this form of secularism existed in a world where religious belief was the only option; unbelief was unthinkable, but there were realms in which sacrality dominated more heavily than in others, like during specific rituals or in designated spaces. "Secular" was thus used to identify the everyday spaces or times when actions were profane. The second sense of the word "secular," hereafter referred to as secular<sub>2</sub>,<sup>199</sup> is the one most commonly used in popular media and scholarly analysis. It embodies the theory that the modern world is moving away from religion, and becoming more "secular."<sup>200</sup> When considering this type of secularism, it is unthinkable that religion still exists in a world where science and technology are able to give factual, evidence-based interpretations of the natural world. Finally, Taylor arrives at the most complicated interpretation of the secular, but the one which most accurately explains the persistence of religion in a world where "secular" in the second sense would assume it to be

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<sup>198</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) 2.

<sup>199</sup> I will be referring to each interpretation as secular<sub>1</sub>, secular<sub>2</sub>, and secular<sub>3</sub>, in the style of James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014). This enables better differentiation between the multiple ways the word "secular" has been used throughout history and in the present day.

<sup>200</sup> Taylor writes, "In this second meaning, secularity consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church. In this sense, the countries of western Europe have mainly become secular—even those who retain the vestigial public reference to God in public space." Taylor (2007) 2.

steeply declining. This third sense of the word “secular,” secular<sub>3</sub>, focuses on the conditions of belief, and the phenomena that have enabled belief in God or a greater power to become a choice, and perhaps a contested or difficult one. When used in this way, “secular” makes the distinction between “a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, [and] one in which it is understood to be one option among others.”<sup>201</sup> In analyzing the shift from the first, oldest interpretation of the secular, to a modern world where the second usage becomes the most common, Taylor devises the third as a balance between an undeniably religion-dominated world and a world in which religion may no longer exist. In twentieth- and twenty-first-century America, religious belief is an option, but non-belief is becoming an equally valid and common option, especially within certain regions and among certain demographics. How religions contend with this shift in society will likely determine their longevity in the modern world.

The modern ecumenical movement, as exemplified by “A Formula of Agreement,” therefore exists in a secular<sub>3</sub> world. Although many religious groups in the twenty-first century hold tightly to their history and tradition, including the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod discussed in the previous chapter, many more are acknowledging that their beliefs are challenged in the modern day. Throughout the dialogue preceding the “Formula of Agreement,” various participants recognized that the world around them was changing, and if they did not change along with it and update aspects of their religion that no longer fit the modern world, their religious tradition may not survive long.<sup>202</sup> Taylor argues that the challenge they face is no mere

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<sup>201</sup> Taylor (2007) 3.

<sup>202</sup> Each publication resulting from the dialogue acknowledges this challenging environment in which the ecumenical movement resides in some way, often in the secular<sub>2</sub> sense. For example: “In attempting to translate Luther’s theology into the twentieth century, we must never forget to shift the ethical accent since his chief enemy was clericalism whereas ours is secularism. Oversimply, Luther had to put the church back under the gospel; we must put the state and society back under God’s law.” *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 175. “In a world that extols autonomy, the pastoral ministry is openly dependent; in an age that insists on pursuing its self-centered interests, this

“subtraction story,” in which religion is simply being subtracted from the modern worldview. While many assume that modernity and secularity mean that “human beings hav[e] lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge,” this fails to explain how religious movements have maintained membership in the technological era, and how some movements and conceptions of spirituality are growing.<sup>203</sup> Instead, modern religious people are faced with a choice: they either believe in God—often the more challenging choice in some circles—or they do not. Groups like the Lutherans and Reformed who signed “A Formula of Agreement” have already made their choice, one influenced by a long history of religious adherence, reform, and adaptation. The question then becomes how these Protestants maintain their belief in a society where the other option is constantly surrounding them, or even enticing them.

Taylor analyzes this question through his discussion of two terms he has introduced: fragilization and cross-pressures. Fragilization represents the idea that, “[i]n the face of different options, where people who lead “normal” lives do not share my faith (and perhaps believe something very different), my own faith commitment becomes fragile—put into question, dubitable.”<sup>204</sup> Although people who believe in a higher power may deny this phenomenon, since strength of faith is valued and emphasized in religious communities, many would acknowledge that they face challenges from time to time. Taylor describes these challenges as cross-pressures, where there are multiple options for spirituality and finding a sense of fullness, which often results in children abandoning the solutions of their parents.<sup>205</sup> These cross-pressures act on both

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office finds its meaning in serving others.” *An Invitation to Action* (1984) 28. “[This dialogue] will affirm and demonstrate that Lutheran and Reformed heirs of the sixteenth-century Reformation together have a viral contribution to offer to a wider church struggling with the phenomenon of global diversity in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.” *A Common Calling* (1993) 57.

<sup>203</sup> Taylor (2007) 22.

<sup>204</sup> Smith (2014) 141.

<sup>205</sup> Taylor (2007) 303.

religious and non-religious people in modern society: even in what some assume to be a secular age in Taylor's second sense of the word, it cannot be denied that people harbor a continued desire for spiritual experiences. Taylor believes this phenomenon "results from a profound dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order."<sup>206</sup> Religious people may see the draw of a "rational" perspective on the world, in which there is no judgment or fear of wrath from a higher power; yet a pre-ordained moral code, a community of people who share their views, and a belief in something greater than human beings and stretching beyond the human lifespan may appeal to non-religious people. Certainly, to many people, the other perspective has its benefits and its drawbacks, but conversion between sides may be unthinkable to most. Given this tendency against conversion, there must be some system through which believers maintain their views.

Ecumenical partnerships provide one method of belief maintenance in a secular<sub>3</sub> world. Although many reasons, extensively outlined in Chapter Two, were given to support the 1997 Lutheran-Reformed partnership, driving the dialogue is the recognition that the Churches serve a common mission in a world that constantly challenges their beliefs. Throughout the published texts, the Lutheran and Reformed participants emphasize their shared desire to proclaim their Gospel to the world, despite differing interpretations and historical strife.<sup>207</sup> This sort of evangelization was unnecessary in a secular<sub>1</sub> age, when everyone believed in a similar message,<sup>208</sup> but it has become an important mission of religious people living in society in which some people choose not to be religious. In the decades before "A Formula of Agreement"

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<sup>206</sup> Taylor (2007) 506.

<sup>207</sup> This point is emphasized in both the title of the last series of dialogue *A Common Calling*, and in its oft-repeated claim, "Since we share a common understanding of the gospel, we must exercise our common calling in witness and service to the world." *A Common Calling* (1993) 57.

<sup>208</sup> As Taylor asserts, "In general, going against God is not an option in the enchanted world," referring to the world in which belief in demons, witches, and God's controlling hand in the world was commonplace, which is clearly no longer the case. Taylor (2007) 41.



became official practice of the participating Lutheran and Reformed Churches, the dialogue gradually de-emphasized historical scriptural differences in favor of a unified message that recognized the agreements Lutherans and the Reformed could reach in the twentieth century, unhindered by the condemnations and animosity of the past. This continues a trend that Taylor recognized, beginning in the seventeenth century. He claims that “after the terrible struggles around deep theological issues to do with grace, free will, and predestination, many people... hunger for a less theologically elaborate faith which would guide them toward holy living.”<sup>209</sup> This shift towards a simplified, inclusive, community-building religion has only grown in the secular<sub>3</sub> age.<sup>210</sup> Not only does Taylor’s work support this conclusion, but so too does the “Leuenberg Agreement,” which preceded the similar American agreement by 25 years. This major act of ecumenism in the 1970s represents Europe’s earlier transition into the secular<sub>3</sub> age, which Taylor supports with his extensive emphasis on the French Revolution and the holdovers of Stoicism.<sup>211</sup> The American transition into the secular<sub>3</sub> world, a few decades after the European one, culminated in a similar model of ecumenism, proving the influence of the secular<sub>3</sub> age on the modern ecumenical movement.

Contrary to popular belief, secularization is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. Taylor provides explanations that span centuries, drawing on evidence of specific situations in which beliefs have changed over time and contributed to the modern secular<sub>3</sub> age. The most relevant to this thesis on Protestant ecumenism is Taylor’s discussion of the changes wrought by the Reformation. In the previously “enchanted” world, in the secular<sub>1</sub> era, religion was the

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<sup>209</sup> Taylor (2007) 225.

<sup>210</sup> As Smith identifies in his analysis of *A Secular Age*, even Taylor falls into this habit of updating history to a new age. “Taylor seems willing to jettison aspects of historic Christian teaching if he thinks doing so will help meet the maximal demand.” Smith (2014) 113. This “maximal demand” is identified as how people “define [their] highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn’t crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity.” Taylor (2007) 639-640.

<sup>211</sup> Taylor (2007) 120.

explanation for every natural phenomenon and played a primary role in the actions of daily life. The Reformation, however, became “an engine of disenchantment,” as people sought to satisfy God and deserve God’s mercy not through ritual actions but through faith alone.<sup>212</sup> Good works became not the way of obtaining God’s grace, but a means of portraying God’s grace and the Word of God through action. Since there was no real way to earn salvation in the Protestant perspective, the Reformation altered the emphasis on sacred time and space, bringing that time more in line with daily life. Taylor argues that as faith became a part of daily life, it paved the path for exclusive humanism. This new conception of the world derived morality and good actions not from faith or a higher power, but from the fact that humans relate to each other daily and should strive to make those encounters as fulfilling as possible.<sup>213</sup> Yet even alongside exclusive humanism, traditional religions persisted. Following the Reformation, the Protestant practice of incorporating faith into daily life spread through missionary work and the expansion of Protestant communities, as Protestant missionaries continued “trying to adapt the Gospel to the culture and traditions of the people it [was] being preached to.”<sup>214</sup> It can thus be concluded that the ecumenical movement is a continuation of this adaptation of the Word of God to the secular<sub>3</sub> America.

Taylor’s work further helps to explain the emphasis of “A Formula of Agreement” on full communion partnership. The shifts occurring as a result of secularism<sub>3</sub> cause believers to “feel the call to go beyond [their] narrower circles of solidarity, to embrace a wider range of people, even all of humanity, in the scope of [their] beneficent action.”<sup>215</sup> Although two branches of

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<sup>212</sup> Taylor (2007) 77-79.

<sup>213</sup> Taylor gives more evidence for this in saying, “[E]conomic’ (that is, ordered, peaceful, productive) activity is more and more the model for human behavior.” He supports this argument with Weber’s thesis of the Protestant ethic, which of course has its own counterarguments, but is logical in explaining the rise of exclusive humanism out of Protestantism. Taylor (2007) 229.

<sup>214</sup> Taylor (2007) 94.

<sup>215</sup> Taylor (2007) 255.

Protestantism coming together is not quite the broad strokes of partnership Taylor imagines, this feeling of community between believers explains the strive towards ecumenism. Taylor refers to communion in the sense of a coming together of peoples, but taken more literally, Holy Communion serves this purpose as well. To the Christians participating in the “Formula of Agreement” dialogue, Holy Communion serves to unite brothers and sisters who believe in the same Christ despite historical differences. The de-emphasis of Scripture follows Taylor’s hypothesis of a religion purified of its stricter elements,<sup>216</sup> although his assumption that rituals and emotions will also disappear falls short in the examination of full communion partnerships. Lutheran and Reformed partners have not lost the Eucharist as their central practice; if anything, it has become even more important for representing their fellowship than it had been to any of the individual Churches in the past. However, Taylor is right in justifying this as a “flight from particularities of embodiment.”<sup>217</sup> In the current religious world, Holy Communion serves to unite people who share beliefs that have become the minority among people today, so, at least to the more liberal Churches that signed “A Formula of Agreement,” the particularities that have divided them throughout history are no longer the most important features of their practice. These divisions are overshadowed by the desire to share both Word and Table alike.

Interpreted through a more critical lens, the ecumenical movement is a desperate attempt for religious people to maintain power they have traditionally had but are losing in the new age. They seek partnerships that bridge different hermeneutics or traditions, because united they are more numerous and powerful than as individual denominations. This narrow interpretation assumes a secular<sup>2</sup> age, in which religion will soon fail to maintain any adherents at all. However, when presented with this explanation for ecumenism, not only would most religious

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<sup>216</sup> Taylor (2007) 288.

<sup>217</sup> Smith (2014) 58.

people vehemently deny it, but Charles Taylor would as well. In his chapter titled “The Immanent Frame,” Taylor proposes the theory that modern society places itself in a primarily natural world, in which transcendence to a higher or supernatural realm has become a minority belief.<sup>218</sup> How people place themselves within this frame, however, is dependent on how they were raised, their station in life, their career, and their beliefs, among other factors. Taylor makes a distinction between people who reside in an “open” space, in which they recognize that their belief in or against transcendence may be contested, and those who are “closed” to any interpretation other than the one they assume to be correct. Similarly, he asserts that some recognize their belief as a “take” on things, to which there is another viable option, while others see their views as a “spin,” which allows the easy dismissal of those who disagree. Within this division of the frame, the Roman Catholic Charles Taylor, who wrote the volume recognizing the legitimacy of secular beliefs, resides in the “open” and “take” categories; religious fundamentalists are “open” to transcendence but deny other interpretations, and are thus a “spin;” and “the spin of closure... is hegemonic in the Academy.”<sup>219</sup> Given this interpretation, both the religious people partaking in full communion partnerships and the academics criticizing the push for ecumenism have their own spin on the situation in this secular age, further defining the importance of a balanced analysis that considers both perspectives.

Taking the religious perspective, scholarly criticism, and Taylor’s treatise into consideration, the best explanation for modern ecumenism is that it is a reaction to a society in which those who choose religion are no longer opposed by those who choose other religions, but by those who choose no religion at all. In sixteenth-century Europe, the differences between the Lutherans, Calvinists, and Roman Catholics were the greatest imaginable differences. Their

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<sup>218</sup> Taylor (2007) 539-593.

<sup>219</sup> Adapted from the table in James K. A. Smith (2014) 95. Quote from Taylor (2007) 549.

interpretations of the Eucharist, Scripture, and ministry divided them along strict boundaries that informed their worship practice and other community-building activities. However, in twentieth-century America, these divisions were not as clear as they were when the traditions began forming and attempting to spread as an alternative to other, seemingly incorrect or oppressive forms of Christianity. Instead, believers, no matter the tradition or confession, now face opposition from the non-believers whose choice to not believe in a higher power has only recently become a viable option. Given this opposition, the minor interpretational differences pale in comparison to the difference between those who believe in a God and those who do not. This far greater distinction creates a greater emphasis on the common message, that is, belief in God and a hope to spread God's word regardless of the specificities. This emphasis on the common message drives ecumenism, and explains the push for ecumenism in the twentieth-century secular<sub>3</sub> world.

Secularism does not mean that science and technology will make religion disappear, but rather that religion is changing in the face of this new hermeneutic of the modern world. While previously different scriptural interpretation divided Protestants and Catholics who relied on the Bible as their guide to life, now recognizing the Bible as God's Word draws previously-divided communities together. This phenomenon is no better exemplified than in the practice of Holy Communion. Historically, as outlined in the introduction, attempts to reach a common agreement on Communion, as at the Marburg Colloquy, failed due to the differences in Christology and the interpretation of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Yet "A Formula of Agreement" and its series of discussions allowed for Lutherans, Presbyterians, and other Reformed congregations to share the same table for the Lord's Supper. This change is perhaps best explained not only by Charles Taylor's explanation of the secular<sub>3</sub> age, but by Victor Turner's sociological text, *A Ritual*

*Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Victor Turner (1920-1983) was a cultural anthropologist who wrote extensively on themes related to religion, including rituals and symbolism. Published in 1967, Turner's *A Ritual Process* evaluates how communities move from one form of structure to another form, with a liminal state as the segue between the two. This may occur in societies as a whole, in groups, or during religious ceremonies. Turner's theory of *communitas* as a facilitator of togetherness and community in an unstructured state serves to explain the emphasis on full communion partnership between previously-at-odds Protestants in the secular<sub>3</sub> age.

Victor Turner's *A Ritual Process* analyzes the stages religions undergo as they adapt to unprecedented changes in society. He theorizes that while society is initially structured, it enters into a liminal state upon significant changes in society, before this liminal state reaches an aggregation phase and resolves into a new structure.<sup>220</sup> Taylor comments on Turner's theory, recognizing that structure can be rephrased as "the code of behaviour of a society."<sup>221</sup> Following the first structure stage, the liminal or anti-structure state is characterized by rituals and events of *communitas* in which people are equalized, "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."<sup>222</sup> When *communitas* events occur, "a community of many-sided human beings, fundamentally equal... are associated together."<sup>223</sup> Combining Taylor's and Turner's perspectives on society, the conclusion presents that society has moved through the enchanted, historic time when "secular" only existed in the secular<sub>1</sub> sense; through the liminal state of the Early Modern era, circa 1450-1650, when the Protestant Reformation caused an age of disenchantment and enabled the option of disbelief; to the current secular<sub>3</sub> age in which both belief and non-belief are valid options. This

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<sup>220</sup> Victor Turner, *A Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969) 96.

<sup>221</sup> Taylor (2007) 47.

<sup>222</sup> Turner (1969) 95.

<sup>223</sup> Taylor (2007) 49.

structure-liminality-aggregation process has produced a new structure of society, in which both options exist but adherence to one or the other may feel like anti-structure given the feeling of marginality of either choice.

Given this combination of Taylor and Turner, it becomes clear that religions generally have three options as a response to social change. They may either fiercely defend their tradition, as the LCMS has done, and attempt to remain in the former structure; disappear entirely in favor of the new options of unbelief and inhabit the non-belief realm of the new structure; or adapt to the secular<sub>3</sub> age and modify their tradition to better align with society's worldview as the belief option in the current structure. As elements of the new structure, either of the latter groups may still feel marginal or excluded from the social structure. Turner identifies that "[t]ransition has become a permanent condition [in religious life]."<sup>224</sup> This constant feeling of transition results in a desire to feel more secure or like a part of something larger, which can be embodied in practices of *communitas*. *Communitas* refers to situations in which "an in-group preserves its identity against members of out-groups, protects itself against threats to its way of life, and renews the will to maintain the norms on which the routine behavior necessary for its social life depends."<sup>225</sup> Turner uses monastic lifestyles to exemplify this feeling of transition, yet Holy Communion may also represent a situation in which a liminal state preserves the feeling of *communitas* among religious people. The celebration of the Lord's Supper lacks some of the properties of liminality that Turner identifies in tribal rituals,<sup>226</sup> but it serves to bring the community together in a holy and sacred time that is distinct from the secular<sub>1</sub> structure of daily

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<sup>224</sup> Turner (1969) 107.

<sup>225</sup> Turner (1969) 111.

<sup>226</sup> Among many of the characteristics that Turner outlines are "anonymity, absence of property..., sexual continence..., minimization of sex distinctions," etc, which Holy Communion does not include. However, it does exemplify certain characteristics, including "homogeneity, equality..., sacred instruction, [and] the maximization of religious, as opposed to secular," as ritual words are spoken, all kneel or at the same altar or in the same pews, and a holy time is instilled. Turner (1969) 111.

life outside the chapel or sanctuary. Turner describes this phenomenon as “*normative* *communitas*, where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources, and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these goals, the existential *communitas* is organised [*sic*] into a perduring social system.”<sup>227</sup> The Holy Communion further exemplifies *communitas* because it challenges “the structures of power,” meaning the secular<sub>3</sub> world of everyday experience, “by a life which claims to be higher, and yet which couldn’t simply replace the established order. They are forced into co-existence, and hence some kind of complementarity.”<sup>228</sup> The people entering a sacred space and partaking in the holy ritual have left behind the social structure, in which they may choose to believe or not. They have made their choice to believe, or inherited it from their family, and they are partaking in higher times with those who have made the same choice. However, since the secular<sub>3</sub> age has been so thoroughly engrained in public life, this action remains a private behavior confined to a select in-group—an action of *communitas* that defies structure while existing within it.

Full communion partnerships and ecumenical agreements extend this concept of *communitas* beyond the traditional religious boundaries of the former structure. While out-groups were previously those with whom denominations did not share a confession or interpretation of the Eucharist, the out-group has now become those who do not share religious belief entirely. In response to this social change, some Churches, like the LCMS, choose to adhere to tradition in the face of the secular<sub>3</sub> age and have done so for decades or centuries, making both other denominations and non-believers their outgroup. Others, like the four Churches participating in “A Formula of Agreement,” have updated their tradition to accommodate the new structure and minimize the out-group size, consciously or not. The latter

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<sup>227</sup> Turner (1969) 132.

<sup>228</sup> Taylor (2007) 49.



have, as Turner identified, “mobilize[d] and organize[d their] resources” in a way that permitted the overshadowing of traditional confessions and scriptural interpretation. This new perception of a more inclusive sacrament reflects Turner’s argument that *communitas* “movements cut right across tribal and national divisions during their initial momentum.”<sup>229</sup> Holy Communion at the very least cuts across denominational divisions, in defiance of the new and marginalizing structure characterized by the secular<sub>3</sub> age.

“A Formula of Agreement,” although not necessarily the inevitable conclusion of years of interdenominational dialogue, reflects the changes that occurred as society entered what Taylor has named a secular<sub>3</sub> age. While sixteenth century European society inhabited an enchanted age in which no time lacked the presence of supernatural forces, but some times and spaces were sacred and others profane, twentieth-century Americans inhabit a time and space in which many make the choice not to believe in any force greater than humanity. Upon entering this age, religious people were faced no longer with divisions along denominational lines, but along the boundary between belief and unbelief. This explains the tendency of many Churches to seek relationships with groups they may not have previously aligned with, but did in the new age. Both Charles Taylor’s and Victor Turner’s philosophical and sociological theories lend credibility to the argument that the new structure of the secular<sub>3</sub> age has produced unity between religious groups, or at least mainline liberal Protestants like the ELCA, RCA, PCUSA, and UCC, who are no longer concerned with their scriptural differences but instead seek community and normative organization through a shared Holy Communion.

Balancing the voices of Charles Taylor, Victor Turner, their critics, and modern religious people allows for a new interpretation of ecumenism. Taylor and Turner explain the search for

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<sup>229</sup> Turner (1969) 112.

Christian unity as a response to changes in society. The Academy views it as an attempt to maintain power in a world where religion will soon disappear. The mainline Protestant religious groups that signed “A Formula of Agreement” recognize the changing society and declining numbers, but they emphasize their common mission as the instigator of unity movements. Each of these explanations has its benefits and its drawbacks, but the history of the participating Churches, their discussion of theology, and the conclusion of full communion gives a more complete picture of modern ecumenism. Without a doubt, the world is changing, which religious and non-religious people alike recognize, but religion has surprising tenacity which many scholars who predicted its obliteration failed to recognize. In the secular<sup>3</sup> world, Scripture and tradition no longer divide religious groups, but bring them together as a community of believers. Although “A Formula of Agreement” included a de-emphasis of historical divisions, it established a model for allowing common mission and belief to unite even the most historically-antagonistic groups, a model which will persist and expand as the secular<sup>3</sup> era continues.

## Conclusion

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” Ps. 133:1

From 1517 to 1997 and beyond, the Lutheran and Reformed Churches have endured many changes as they have attempted to persist in a society in which belief in a higher power has become just one option among many. In the early years, members of these Churches were unable to agree on the theological topics that divided them, including the proper interpretation of Scripture, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the results of justification and predestination. The Churches then traversed the continent of Europe and then the Atlantic Ocean, before forming synods on American soil that were divided based not only on these theological differences, but also on their national and linguistic heritage. As the Churches faced Americanization and new trends of national identity, they formed unions that bridged their historical identities, and even their theological disagreements. In 1962, Lutheran and Reformed Churches in America began a series of conversations that extended over four decades, discussed their theological differences and the influence history and modernity have had on them, and concluded that there were no longer any church-dividing issues that would prevent an ecumenical agreement. In 1997, four liberal, mainline Protestant Churches, the ELCA, the RCA, the PCUSA, and the UCC, confirmed “A Formula of Agreement,” bringing them into a full communion partnership that allowed the sharing of the Lord’s Supper and the exchange of ministers between these traditions that 450 years previously had been fiercely divided.

Although the dialogue preceding “A Formula of Agreement” presented many reasons for the trend towards full communion, their idea of serving a common mission epitomizes the

tendencies of certain groups to reach understanding in an era in which they hold a declining opinion. In what Charles Taylor has dubbed the secular age, society has shifted from one in which everyone *de facto* believed in supernatural forces because they existed in an enchanted age in which unbelief was unfathomable, to one in which such belief has become one option of many, and the denial of the existence of supernatural forces is a legitimate choice as well.

Churches that persist in this age may respond to these changes either by strictly adhering to their tradition and forming increasingly insular groups, or by reaching out to other groups who share similar beliefs. The latter has been the tendency of the liberal, mainline Protestant denominations named above, who recognize that the out-group has changed in this new structure, and their in-group must expand and transcend denominational lines in order to present a united front to this new out-group. By entering into agreements about *communitas* events like the Eucharist, these Lutheran and Reformed Churches represent the changes that occur among groups that feel less dominant in society. They are no longer divided by the theological differences that their forefathers held so dear, but instead united by their common belief in the Word of God and its continued relevance in the modern era.

The trend of ecumenism has continued to develop during the 20 years since the four Churches confirmed their participation in “A Formula of Agreement.” The Reformed Churches that joined “A Formula of Agreement” have expanded their partnerships by joining organizations such as the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together, and the Global Christian Forum.<sup>230</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has since entered into full communion partnerships with the Episcopal Church USA and the

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<sup>230</sup> Reformed Church in America, “Ecumenical Partners,” <https://www.rca.org/partners>, accessed 16 March 2018.

Moravian Church in 1999, and the United Methodist Church in 2009.<sup>231</sup> Entering into these agreements, as evidenced in Chapter Three, has created strife with more conservative Lutheran Churches, who take seriously Luther's comment on other versions of Christianity: "We have no differences on the deity of Christ, nor on His humanity. The difference lies here: they will not let the Holy Spirit do His work."<sup>232</sup> The ELCA's "Inter-Lutheran" section of its ecumenical partnerships webpage states, "In 2012, The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod leadership communicated its intention to discontinue meetings and participation with ELCA churchwide staff, including areas of support and training of military and federal chaplaincy, response to HIV and AIDS, and national coordination of recovery after a disaster... The ELCA remains open to national dialogue and cooperation in the future."<sup>233</sup> This division is a consequence of "A Formula of Agreement," when the LCMS accused the ELCA of abandoning its Lutheran heritage and allowing the Reformed to infiltrate its altar. Clearly not every denomination is as inclined as the ELCA to extend an olive branch to other Churches in the secular<sup>3</sup> age. The path these more insular Churches will take, and their longevity in the current era, cannot be predicted.

However, many Churches continue to welcome the challenge of ecumenical partnership. The most recent trend in ELCA ecumenical dialogue has been the search for an agreement with the Roman Catholic Church, from whom its split 500 years ago sparked the Protestant Reformation. The Lutheran and Catholic Churches declared 2017 a year of commemoration, and the first centennial in which they collectively recognized the positive changes wrought by Luther's Reformation. Revisiting the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, in which the ELCA and the Roman Catholic Church reached an agreement on the issue of

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<sup>231</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations," <https://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations>, accessed 16 March 2018.

<sup>232</sup> *Marburg Revisited* (1966) 8.

<sup>233</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations."

justification and sought to reach agreement on wider issues related to God's mercy and salvation, the two Churches published *A Declaration on the Way* in 2017. This text set the stage for further dialogue between the two Churches, as it “draws together a litany of 32 consensus statements, where Catholics and Lutherans already have said there are not church-dividing differences between them... [A] more tentative section identifies some ‘remaining differences’ – not intending to be comprehensive but suggesting some ways forward.”<sup>234</sup> The drive for these conversations has been less theological in emphasis, not focused on the distinction between transubstantiation and consubstantiation, but rather on the pain division in altar fellowship causes families, where the parents may be Catholic and children are not, or one spouse is Catholic and the other is not.

In the secular<sup>3</sup> age, personal narrative and culture are driving changes in churches. Although some may view this as positive progress, others may view it as betraying history and tradition. Each of these responses is characteristic of the structural changes in society, in which some cling to the previous structure while others conform to the new structure that resulted from the prior stage of liminality. In twenty-first-century America, mainline Protestants are feeling increasingly like a minority, as national polls reflect declining numbers and popular media uses the term “secular” in the second sense to explain all sorts of societal issues. Many Churches have responded to these phenomena by reaching across denominational lines, de-emphasizing Scripture in favor of unity, and establishing ecumenical partnerships that increase the feeling of community between groups and create a safe space in which opinions and beliefs can be freely expressed. While it is unlikely that denominational boundaries will be entirely erased and result in one unified confession-less Christian church, certainly more partnerships will be created that

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<sup>234</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Declaration on the Way,” <https://www.elca.org/Declaration-on-the-Way>, accessed 16 March 2018.

enable the sharing of a feeling of *communitas* among those who believe in a higher power. From their roots in the European Reformation, to their establishment in America, an increasing number of mainline Protestant Churches are seeking relationships with others who share their mission in the world. If the past is an indicator for the future, and society continues to exist in a secular<sup>3</sup> space, the tendency will be towards ecumenical partnerships that mirror the one in “A Formula of Agreement,” overcoming historical differences and building bridges that transverse denominational lines.

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